WHAT WOULD CAPTAIN UNDERPANTS DO?

A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN IN SCHOOL

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Abstract

Using cultural studies and critical discourse analysis as guiding theories, this study focuses on the literary representation of school experience by analyzing popular children's literature. The study focuses on literature appealing to the 8 – 12 year-old audience. Books of primary examination include L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* series, Barbara Park's *Junie B. Jones* series, Beverly Cleary's *Ramona Quimby* books, Dav Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* series, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Andrew Clemenet's *Frindle,* C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* series, Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* books, Betty McDonald's *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* books, and Walter Dean Meyer's *Monster.*

The general trends found are:

1. Books featuring female protagonists are often concerned with relationships. The protagonists are frustrated that the roles and expectations of school do not allow space for discussing relationships or personal information.
2. Books featuring male protagonists generally focus on themes of power structures and how the students use subversive methods to assert their values in spite of the dominant administrative authority.
3. When books feature children who are working on character or ethical development, those children are often removed from the school context and placed in a more fantastical context.

4. The literature surveyed implies that students value unrealistically committed teachers with no interests outside of the children, who can make lessons clear, relevant, and interactive.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of the Problem

While much is studied and discussed about the nature of school from educational and anthropological perspectives, the lack of sophistication in children makes it difficult to include them in a study of their school environment.

Using a literary approach to examine the context of school allows us a method of examining aspects of the school environment from a child's perspective. If texts are carefully chosen, taking into consideration popularity through quantity or popularity over time of the titles and taking into consideration the close proximity of author/narrator to reader, then a close textual analysis can yield insight into what school looks like from a child's point of view. How do students view authority and the behavioral requirements of school? What kind of relationship do they expect and find with adults in school? What types of instruction are effective from a child's perspective? What does a "good" teacher look like from a child's view? What can school teach effectively? What can it not teach effectively?

1.2 Background of the Problem

The culture of school is not the same as culture in school. Within school walls, a distinct set of norms prevails. Behaviors and attitudes are expected that may not be in harmony with the cultural elements a student is used to following outside of school.

With white, American, middle-class children, this conflict is not as apparent because their culture is more closely aligned with accepting school culture as valid. But all children originate in a location other than school. In general, children do no grow up in a school. School is not their primary residence. They participate in a social construct that is different than how school works. For example, most families do not ask their children to sit at desks and raise their hands to speak. Children at home do not spend a majority of their time engaged in typical school behavior such as seat work; they do not eat in a cafeteria; and they do not have the organizational behaviors of school. In other words, a child learns how to behave outside of school first. When the child enters school, he or she has to learn a different set of behaviors that are exclusive to the school context while maintaining knowledge of out-of-school behavior. To be successful in school, a child must know how to

negotiate at least two cultures (home culture and school culture) successfully before their academic ability can come into play effectively. A student might be intelligent, but if he is unable or unwilling to adapt his behavior to acceptable school norms, then, typically, little learning takes place.

By being aware of the cultural negotiations and difficulties of being a student, the teacher can be self-reflective and a critical thinker who creates meaningful relationships and seeks to engage students in significant learning activities.

1.3 Importance of Study

In researching different educational models and cultural approaches to education, I found myself asking more and more fundamental questions about what school is, how it works, and, especially, what children might think about going into the school setting every day.

While it is perhaps too easy to complain about school and to suspect that a different educational model would be preferable to the system that we have now, the fact is that we do have a system in place, and that system would be very difficult to completely redesign on a global scale. All systems are flawed in practice, and so

understanding the current system's advantages, disadvantages, and elements is more useful on a practical level than constructing a Utopian alternative.

The study of education often focuses on the behavior of the teacher, the behavior of the students, assessment tools and outcomes, but not as often on how the students perceive their cultural setting, how their expectations differ from what they encounter, and what their methods of coping with this discrepancy are. While our literary analysis will not provide conclusive data, it will approach questions from a different perspective than a quantitative survey would. Literary study, applied to a specific cultural group, can offer insights and points of meditation that open up fruitful lines of further inquiry.

1.4 Purpose of Study

This study seeks to apply literary criticism to children's literature in order to examine what children's literature says about school. A close reading of texts reveals elements that are often thrown into relief and are therefore easily seen and applied back to the real context of school. Since literature can only reflect a portion of reality at a time, and especially with the qualities of simplicity and

often length in children's literature, threads and themes are pulled to extremes that make educational issues apparent when they might otherwise have been tangled in with other elements and issues, and not so readily recognized.

This study does not attempt to arrive at prescriptive conclusions about how schools should be run or what education should look like. Rather, it is a descriptive approach to investigating what the literature that children read says about school.

1.5 Research Questions

1. In children's literature, how do students view authority and behavioral requirements of school?
2. In children's literature, what kinds of relationships do children expect and find with adults in school?
3. What does a "good" teacher look like in children's literature?
4. From the perspective of children's literature, what is school good at teaching?

1.6 Assumptions of the Study

The foundational assumption of this study is that fiction can provide insight into the real world. My approach will be to neither take the stories as a "mirror of reality" nor to dismiss them because they are "made up." Rather, I will look for reoccurring issues that seem to point to issues in real life. I will then discuss these common themes in the context of research and practical experience with education.

1.7 Delimitations of the Study

This study involves a wide reading of children's literature primarily in the age range of 8-12-year-old readers. Picture books and pre-chapter books do not deal with school as often, simply because they are aimed at children who are younger than school age range. Books in the 8-12 category are longer and more in depth. Since children in this age range spend much of their time in school, a wide variety of books includes school in the subject or setting of the story.

From a general reading of approximately 150 books that in some way addressed the research questions, titles and series were narrowed down based on how widely read they were, their literary

merit, and how directly they provided insight into the research questions. Of those, not all books in a series will be directly addressed in the analysis, though they will add to the discussion when we approach a series as a whole. While examples from only a few books will be used, the general attitudes and values of the series as a whole will be characterized through them.

Because this is an interdisciplinary approach, several writing styles are options. In the end, I chose to use MLA conventions simply because of the style of writing about literature in the present tense. For me, attempting literary analysis in a style that advocates the use of past-tense language when dealing with a close textual reading was too awkward. With in-text citations, any of the styles would have worked, but I chose to use MLA throughout for consistency.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

One of the difficulties of this study is limiting the number of texts to a manageable quantity. While many more texts could have been included, eventually the mass becomes unwieldy. Well over 100 books were considered for this study, so the texts had to be narrowed down according to several specifications. Books that were

more widely read (that is had sold millions of copies), were advertised in book stores and libraries, were talked about by children in the community, were acknowledged in the wider cultural area such as in newspapers, etc., were given more careful consideration. For example, while *Captain Underpants* seems a bit rough on its literary surface, it speaks to an audience that does not traditionally read voluntarily. Pilkey's books give insight into a population that might not otherwise have a literary voice.

Secondly, books of more literary merit were more likely to be used. Books such as *Frindle* and *Ramona the Brave* have award-winning authors. Some books such as *Anne of Green Gables,* the *Ramona* books, *Understood Betsy,* and *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* are still around after fifty to a hundred years. C.S. Lewis' books about Narnia are widely read classics, and while J.K. Rowling's work on the *Harry Potter* series is something of an instant classic, it has enough of both wide readership and academic attention to make it essential to include.

Thirdly, some books were chosen simply because they more directly addressed important points about school or learning situations than other books. The *Junie B.* series speaks to similar issues as *Anne of Green Gables.* Cleary's *Ramona* books give

continuity through time to attitudes and issues that are still present through several generations of readers. In the analysis about alternative learning situations and environments, clearly there is an abundance of books that show children in learning situations that do not involve school, especially in the fantasy genre. However, the books I chose, *Artemis Fowl* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,* are widely read and directly address children avoiding school to enter an alternative learning situation.

Also, I did feel that I was able to find a balance of books with both female and male protagonists. It seems that gender affects how school is experienced, but that there still is a "typical" way to approach school for both girls and boys. While I had not intended to focus specifically on gender issues due to the scope of the project, I did allow the common themes to fall into natural categories, which happened to divide along gender lines.

I had intended to use more multicultural books in this study to give a more rounded view of how cultural differences influence the school experience. However, I found that for the most part, books I reviewed with minority protagonists did not contain effective stories about school. This phenomenon seemed to be because minority protagonists were concerned about issues of ethnicity, about

surviving as a member of a minority group or finding identity as a member of a minority group, and were less able to focus on the issues of "fine tuning" the school experience. Students from an ethnic majority were more secure in the more fundamental question of identity in the larger society. Even when they were searching to find their specific place in society, some of the issues of belonging, identity, and self esteem that minority children were wrestling with did not come into play for majority children.

The two minority books I did use, *Brother Hood* and *Monster* are on a junior high reading level, but for the most part, I tried to keep within the 8-12-year-old category for the sake of simplicity. The other books with a minority protagonist are *Captain Underpants,* where George Beard is African American. Nothing in the books ever suggests any distinction in George's behavior from the rest of the school population, nor is there any difference in how he is treated. Aside from the illustrations, the reader would be unaware of George's ethnicity, which creates the dilemma of knowing whether he is actually a minority representative or not. Not enough information is present to be able to address an ethnic approach through George's character.

1.9 Summary

This study is a literary analysis that examines what children's literature says about school. Children's fiction in the 8-12-year-old range will be analyzed for common themes about how children deal with relationships in school, how children cope with authority, what educational practices are seen as effective, what a good teacher looks like from a child's point of view, and when school is or is not an effective learning environment.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Cultural Studies

The discipline of cultural studies – the examination of a subject matter in terms of cultural practices and their relation to power – has recently begun to enter the discourse in the field of education (Rebecca Rogers; Gaztambide-Fernandez et al.; Kincheloe and Steinberg; Dimitriadis and Carlson; Giroux). As Giroux has pointed out, cultural studies has much to offer the critical educator: "Cultural studies offers a theoretical terrain for rethinking schooling as a form of cultural politics while at the same time providing a discourse of intervention and possibility" (201). Giroux goes on to enumerate the tools cultural studies has to offer education:

> First, it offers the basis for creating new forms of knowledge by making language constitutive of conditions for producing meaning as a part of the knowledge/power relationship. [...] Second, by defining culture as a contested terrain, a site of struggle and transformation, cultural studies offers critical educators the opportunity for going beyond cultural analyses that

> romanticize everyday life or take up culture as merely the reflex of the logic of domination. [...] Cultural studies deconstructs historical knowledge as a way of reclaiming an identity for subordinate groups. [...] Third, cultural studies offers the opportunity to rethink the relationship between the issue of difference as it is constituted within subjectivities and between social groups. [...] Finally, cultural studies provides the basis for understanding pedagogy as a form of cultural production rather than as the transmission of a particular skill, body of knowledge, or set of values. ("Resisting" 201-202)

Giroux's list points up the essential ideas contained in cultural studies. Its foundations can be found in Karl Marx's economic writings wherein he critiqued capitalism. His basic thesis for his works contended that the means of production (and thus access to wealth) were held by the bourgeoisie. The proletariat, having no means of production, had to work for the bourgeoisie, thus turning labor into capital, a commodity that could be bought and sold. No longer did a person work directly to fulfill primary needs (growing her own food, sewing his own clothes, building their

own shelter); rather, the person worked in exchange for currency in order to exchange it to fulfill his/her needs. Thus, the worker became alienated from his labor, losing much of his/her identity in the process.

Marx is responsible for developing a conception of and critiquing the ideology that held the capitalist system in place. Cultural studies grew from this root. As Storey writes, "'Culture' in cultural studies is defined politically rather than aesthetically [...] Cultural studies also regards culture as political in a quite specific sense – as a terrain of conflict and contestation" (2). Uncovering ideology is often a difficult undertaking, as it has become so much a part of day-to-day life, as in the old saying, "Fish will be the last to discover water." Ideology is the social/political water we swim through without a thought. As Hall has put it,

> It is precisely its 'spontaneous' quality, its transparency, its 'naturalness,' its refusal to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded, its resistance to change or to correction, its effect of instant recognition, and the closed circle in which it moves which makes common sense, at one and the same time, 'spontaneous,' ideological and unconscious. You cannot

> learn, through common sense, how things are: you can only discover where they fit into the existing scheme of things. In this way, its very taken-for-grantedness is what establishes it as a medium in which its own premises and presuppositions are being rendered invisible by its apparent transparency. (qtd. in Hebdige "Culture" 362-63)

As Althusser has famously put it, "ideology has no history." Bruno LaTour and Steve Woolgar explored this idea further in their book *Laboratory Life* wherein they explore a theory of knowledge construction in a biology lab. They posit that "scientific truth" goes through five phases, starting at the level of speculative hypothesis and advancing (if not aborted) to the realm of unstated assumption. The way you can tell if an idea has reached the top level of truth, they argue, is when the idea is assumed in the construction of lower-level ideas. Gravity, for example, is a top-level truth (81-85).

When an idea reaches this level, even its history starts to disappear. Whereas, during the time the idea was developing, it was but one theory in the fray with other theories that were seen as more or less valid by the scientific community, when it has reached the top status of truth, its story is constructed as if the idea's rise were

inevitable, automatically becoming the main character, its current truth status directing the way its story is told (Latour and Woogar 87).

Cultural studies, however, will take an institution or a movement (Barthes)—the French court system; Foucalt—insane asylums ("Madness"), prisons ("Prisons") and sexuality ("History"); or Hebdige ("Subculture")—the punk movement—and treat it as a "text" which they propose to read closely and analyze because, "Cultural texts [...] do not simply reflect history, they make history and are part of its processes and practices and should, therefore, be studied for the (ideological) work that they do, rather than for the (ideological) work (always happening elsewhere) that they reflect" (Story 3).

To do this, the researcher will identity the cultural text's "problematic":

> A problematic is the theoretical (and ideological) structure, which both frames and produces the repertoire of criss-crossing and competing discourses out of which a text is materially organized. The problematic of a text relates to its moment of historical existence as much by what it excludes as by what it

> includes. That is to say, it encourages a text to answer questions posed by itself, but at the same time it generates the production of 'deformed' answers to the question which it attempts to exclude. Thus a problematic is structured as much by what is absent (what is not said) as by what is present (what is said). (Storey 30)

The cultural text is considered a closed system where the text answers the questions it poses for itself, much like a propaganda leaflet, a sitcom plot, or a television ad. The manifest text asks a question (What can help me clear up my skin?) and then, using the values it has set up explicitly or implicitly (clear skin is desirable), it poses an answer that resolves the problem (Clear-o-Crème). However, beneath the manifest text are many assumptions and ideologies that critical students try to uncover (Why is clear skin so desirable? What happens to people who don't have clear skin?). The cultural text will provide implicit, or "deformed" answers to these questions. This process is called reading a text symptomatically:

> To read a text symptomatically is to perform a double reading: reading first the manifest text, and then through the lapses and distortions, silences and

> absences (the 'symptoms' of a problem struggling to be posed) in the manifest text, to produce and read the latent text, the problematic. (Storey 31)

The cultural text we are interested in for this study is the institution of public education, especially, as our Marxist roots would suggest, the power structures inherent in the institution and how they affect the people embroiled in the system. Because, as Giroux puts it, "Whenever knowledge and power come together, politics not only functions to position people differently with respect to the access of wealth and power, it also provides the conditions for the production and acquisition of learning" (199).

Hebdige gives this example of the invisible ideology and inherent power structure:

> Most modern instates of education, despite the apparent neutrality of the materials from which they are constructed (red brick, white tile, etc.) carry within themselves implicit ideological assumptions which are literally structured into the architecture itself. The categorization of knowledge into arts and sciences is reproduced in the faculty system which houses different disciplines in different buildings, and most colleges

> maintain the traditional divisions by devoting a separate floor to each subject. Moreover, the hierarchical relationship between teacher and taught is inscribed in the very lay-out of the lecture theatre, where the seating arrangements – benches rising in tiers before a raised lectern – dictate the flow of information and serve to naturalize professorial authority. Thus, a whole range of decisions about what is and what is not possible within education have been made, however unconsciously, before the content of individual courses is even decided. ("Culture" 363)

Our inquiry, however, will be less direct than what Hebdige has done. Rather than construct a critique, this study will delineate what popular children's literature does to problematize and symptomatically read the cultural text of school; how it uncovers the invisible ideology and reveals the "distorted" answers it gives to the questions it avoids; namely, what does the power structure of school do to the humans involved with it?

Studies of this nature have been done before. Janice Radway and Tania Modleski both brought a symptomatic reading to the romance novel genre and what it said about the ideology of love and

relationships in suburban America, arguing that women "partially reclaim the patriarchal form of the romance for their own use" (Modleski 184). Tony Bennett and Janet Woolacot analyzed the James Bond novels and movies, showing that "Bond's popularity resulted from his ability to articulate – to connect and to express – a series of cultural and political concerns" (Storey 36). And Pierre Macherey problematized French imperialism through Jules Verne's novels, such as *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, where the intrepid explorers perform great feats of mechanical ingenuity and courage in order to gain access to a far-off or inaccessible place, only to discover that people are already there.

Thus, the books themselves will be read as works of cultural critique. This study will attempt to show what concerns the selected works of children's literature the most about the ideology and structure of public education.

Many critiques of popular culture argue that the relationship between a person and his or her television or popular book is consumer oriented (Medved "Hollywood vs. America," and "Saving Childhood"). The viewer/reader is a receptacle for the ideas and

pronouncements of the medium, accepting it all indiscriminately. Lawrence Grossberg, however, argues,

> We have to acknowledge that, for the most part, the relationship between the audience and popular texts is an active and productive one. The meaning of a text is not given in some independently available set of codes which we can consult at our own convenience. A text does not carry its own meaning or politics already inside of itself; no text is able to guarantee what its effects will be. People are constantly struggling, not merely to figure out what a text means, but to make it mean something that connects to their own lives, experiences, needs and desires. The same text will mean different things to different people, depending on how it is interpreted. And different people have different interpretive resources, just as they have different needs. (52-53)

This difference in interpretation is the premise Radway and Modelski proceed on in their analyses of romance novels, and Ryan and Woolacott in their approach to James Bond movies and books: "The fictional text challenges ideology by using it, making it visible and therefore available to analysis and contestation" (Storey 34).

2.2 Fairy Tales

Although there is much scholarship arguing that fairy tales are mainly used as civilizing influences on children (Tatar; MacLeod; Luecke), some scholars (Bettleheim; Gott; Zipes) have done much work in the realm of fairy tales, tell us that the tales have been used as both vehicles to pass on ideology and as vehicles for subversive thought, especially as the Second World War was ending. As Zipes explains,

> Since the 1950s, "the fantastic in fairy tales for children has been forced to take the offensive, and this situation has not arisen because the fantastic is assuming a more liberating role but because it is in the throes of a last-ditch battle against what many writers have described as technologically instrumental and manipulative forces which operate largely for commercial interests and cast a 'totalitarian" loom over society by making people feel helpless and ineffectual in their attempts to reform and determine their own lives [...] yet it is not merely the survival of good which is reflected in contemporary fairy tales but the fantastic projection of possibilities for non-alienating living conditions. (171-72)

Magic, a staple in fairy tales, is not a tool of deception, but rather, an enlightener:

> The very act of reading a fairy tale is an uncanny experience in that it separates the reader from the restrictions of reality from the onset and makes the repressed unfamiliar familiar once again. [...] Once we begin listening to or reading a fairy tale, there is estrangement or separation from a familiar world inducing an uncanny feeling which is both frightening and comforting. (Zipes 174)

Magic, or its contemporary avatar, wildly improbable technology, is the tool frequently used by children's literature to uncover ideology and expose the hidden machines at work in everyday life. However, sometimes even the ideology of fairy tales needs to be exposed when it is too much a part of a system that is becoming oppressive. For example, the Merryside Women's Liberation Movement in Liverpool, England, published fairy tales to counter traditional values such as

> acquisitive aggression in men and dutiful nurturing of this aggression by women. They argued that 'fairy tales are political. They help to form children's values and

> teach them to accept our society and their roles in it. Central to this society is the assumption that domination and submission are the natural basis of all our relationships.' (Zipes, 180)

The members of the Merryside Movement fashioned their own versions of the fairy tales in order to expose patriarchal and industrial ideology. They wrote, for example, a version of Red Riding Hood where the intrepid girl slays the wolf herself and, armed with confidence, a knife, and a wolf pelt lining in her riding hood, ventures deeper into the forest.

Similarly, Sylvie Selig wrote a book entitled *Of Cannons and Caterpillars* about a kingdom constantly at war. The queen, the young princes, and the widows and orphans of the war live in a bulletproof skyscraper. The queen teaches her daughter and other women about the natural world (which has been obliterated by the war) through the drawings and descriptions she makes in a book. They leave the skyscraper fortress when another war comes along, appropriate a disused castle and recreate the world the Queen had revealed in her book.

We can also see that the book itself often serves as a metaphor for escaping from the "real world" into a fantasy world where the

main character is able to confront problems in the "real world" metaphorically (C. S. Lewis; Ende; Funke). So it seems that children's books are at least subliminally aware of their position as ideology revealers and loci of change.

2.3 Sacred and Secret Stories

Students often struggle with placing their experience within the master narrative of education and the school. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connely hypothesize that teachers are very aware of the "sacred story," or in other words, the set of expectations imposed upon them from research, academics, school boards, and the general tradition of education. However, what the teachers live from day to day frequently deviates from the sacred story. These experiences are what Clandinin and Connely call "secret stories":

> Classrooms are, for the most part, safe places, generally free from scrutiny, where teachers are free to live stories of practice. These lived stories are essentially secret ones. Furthermore, when these secret lived stories are told, they are, for the most part, told to other teachers in other secret places. (25)

I would hypothesize that something very similar goes on between children, trying to make sense of school. However, they often don't have the luxury of enjoying the classroom as a "safe place, generally free from scrutiny." Being scrutinized is frequently what school is all about. Thus the children intuit the existence of the "sacred story" which they perceive as being constructed by the teachers and principals of their schools. In order to interact with the sacred story, they construct a cache of "secret stories." These are the stories they tell amongst themselves, through rhymes (Opie 3), play-acting, pictures, and narratives.

Telling these stories, meant for so insular an audience, is often problematic, however. Teachers, for example, can tell their secret stories to other, sympathetic teachers, but they have to change them for supervisors, parents, etc., because the teachers' experiences contrast with the sacred story enough for them to feel vulnerable in the telling:

> When teachers move out of their classrooms into the out-of-classroom place on the landscape, they often live and tell cover stories, stories in which they portray themselves as experts, certain characters whose teacher stories fit within the acceptable range of the story of

> school being lived in the school. Cover stories enable teachers whose teacher stories are marginalized by whatever the current story of school is to continue to practice and to sustain their teacher stories. (Clandinin and Connely 25)

Students run into the same problems. There is certainly a difference between the way a student tells a story surrounding how he got a bad grade to his parents and to his friends. To a parent, he'll probably tell a story close to the sacred story, giving the teacher power, and then explaining how the teacher misused his power or misunderstood the student's attempts at scholarship, thus creating a cover story. However, to his friends, the student might take a different approach, explaining how he was able to perform subversive acts through the way a paper was written, or by taking liberties with a biology textbook—thus telling a secret story. He can do this because it is within the circle of friends where the child is able to find the "safe," "scrutiny-free" place to tell stories truer to his experience.

In my experience with my own children and other people's children, I have found that it is frustrating to get them to talk about their experience in a sophisticated way. My efforts to draw them out

to make abstract commentary on their experience is often fruitless. Piaget says that until age 11, children usually don't have strong abstracting capabilities. For example, my son developed a strong distaste for a particular family we lived near, especially for one of the girls a year younger than he was. When we tried to get him to talk about it, he had little to say. But one day, his feelings came through eloquently when he brought us a picture of a little stick girl with wavy lines arising from her head and a great big circle and slash through her body. The wavy lines were her "stink," according to my son. For the next few weeks, to work his feelings out, he drew out complicated traps designed to rid his life of his annoyance.

Though his pictures certainly weren't "nice," they were expressive. They used an indirect method of explaining feelings he could not deal with abstractly. The fact that they weren't nice plays right into secret stories. He knew that he was supposed to be nice, but his feelings were in direct conflict with that sacred story. So he developed his own secret story.

We will see these same tactics arising in the books we analyze. Many of them are often considered to be in poor taste by parents and teachers. Often, they are filled with bathroom humor and borderline obscenities. These elements are typically the hallmarks

of the secret stories told by children as they subvert the values being foisted upon them by adults and the institutions they create.

Though Judith Kleinfeld was talking about the stories teachers tell, I think we can draw a constructive parallel between the "teacher tale" and the secret stories children tell about school:

> As a heuristic device, the teacher tale has a number of advantages. First it is memorable. Rural teachers have told us that these kinds of stories remain in their minds when they go out to the villages and that with time they see fresh meanings in the same stories. Second, the story is accepted as valid. Teachers are not hostile to the story the way they so often are to "research" because the story only claims to be one person's experience; it does not make claims to universal truth. Third, the stories are stimulating. They encourage critical reflection on experience. They place the teacher in the role not of the skeptic questioning "findings" but of researcher trying to construct meaning from the kaleidoscope of particular experiences. (Kleinfeld et al., 29)

The secret stories of students share these advantages. They are certainly vivid, as my son's pictures point out. They are also

much more acceptable in the circles they were designed for – other children – than any abstract analysis of a child's feelings that a teacher, parent or psychologist might perform. Parents and teachers are certainly aware of how much more a good story will influence a child than a lecture, and how a story delivered by a peer carries more true weight than one delivered by an adult. As Ronald Ragan once put it, "The worst nine words in the language are: 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help'" (Mamet 17). Both adults and children instinctively know that someone who comes from outside their context usually has little of value to offer on how to handle their unique situations. Thus, they turn to more empathetic sources.

The third point Kleinfeld makes is the most important to our study: the idea that the value of a story doesn't lie so much in how "true" it's content is, but in how well that content resonates with the experience of the listener, and if it can continue to inform the listener's experience in the future. Factuality need not be present for a story to provide resonance. Jerome Bruner writes: "The good story and the well-formed argument are different natural kinds. Both can be used as means for convincing another. Yet what they

convince of is fundamentally different: arguments convince one of their truth, stories of their lifelikeness" (11).

Elliott Eisner details the finer points of what Bruner's argument suggests:

> Several features of stories and of educational criticism contribute to their importance as generalizing vehicles. First, when we limit the content of generalization to what can be said in a literal mode, we limit what can be said. The epistemological utility of the literary narrative or that metaphorical characterization is precisely that such forms convey what literal language cannot represent – or at least cannot represent as well. The form of a text is a part of its meaning, and when meaning is restricted to the literal, those meanings that require other forms must remain voiceless. (203)

Thus, my son's pictures can act as "stories," even though they involve no text.

It is often through reading an entertaining book about the schooling experience that students are able to take narrative control of their own experiences and turn them into "experience texts"

(Richert 162), which they can use to understand the daily complexity of their roles as students.

The purpose of this work is not to study children's reactions to the literature written about school (Jones and Buttrey; Coles; Clark and Higonnet), nor to study the culture of school (Walkerdine; Goldman-Segall; Corsaro), both of which have extensive literature on them already, but rather to describe what the books themselves say about the child's view of schooling.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Judith Kleinfeld, et al., presented research on effective cross-cultural teaching. Their original research question was to find out what kinds of teachers are effective with Native students in rural Alaskan villages. However, they found that "the abstractions typically resulting from research on teaching effectiveness ('time on task,' 'high expectations,' 'cultural congruence') are so vague they actually offer little guidance to teachers" ("Doing Research" 2). They offered an alternative approach to looking at good teaching: the "teacher tale." Kleinfeld, et al., propound the idea that when "an effective teacher mulls over a difficult experience, the particular cases have enormous heuristic value for other teachers" as well as giving teachers a base of strategies for handling similar situations that arise. In his presentation on teacher knowledge, Jukka Husu (2003) stated that "Narrative inquiry is considered as especially suited to get in touch with practical knowledge" (3).

In line with this thinking, the situations depicted in children's literature about children in school, or learning situations that

deliberately avoid school, provide a valuable point of meditation on the relationship triangle of students, teachers, and learning. The fact that Kleinfeld, et al.'s research concerns a cross-cultural situation is also significant.

While a Caucasian teacher from the lower 48 entering a rural village in Alaska for the first time is an obvious cross-cultural setting, if the context of any school is examined closely, all classrooms involves cross-cultural elements. Ethnicity and economic differences exaggerate problems and challenges, but the most homogenous population still involves several sub-cultures that do not always work towards common goals. Students and teachers both are involved in cultural norms apart from the school setting; or in other words, they go home sometimes.

When outside of school, students behave differently than they do while in school. Teachers also attempt to have outside interests and commitments when the work day is over. Both students and teachers must learn how to behave appropriately for the cultural context of school in addition to their lives outside of school. The realm of school has behavior expectations that are different from a non-school setting, yet are specific about behavior expectations and valued attitudes from within the school context. The two main

expectations of students are acceptable behavior and standardized test scores. When students refuse the cultural role extended to them by the institution but are still physically in the cultural area of school due to legal constraint, friction is the inevitable result.

3.2 Methodological Overview

In his essay "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," Clifford Geertz presents a fairly detailed anecdote, taken from his journals during his time in Morocco, of an encounter between a merchant, a tribe of Berbers, and French law enforcement: "Quoted raw [...] this passage conveys [...] a fair sense of how much goes into ethnographic description of even the most elemental sort – how extraordinarily 'thick' it is," (9) says Geertz. He sees this story as the raw material from which an anthropological analysis is fashioned: "Analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of signification – what Ryle called established codes, a somewhat misleading expression, for it makes the enterprise sound too much like that of the cipher clerk when it is much more like that of the literary critic – and determining their social ground and import" (9).

James Clifford also has made close comparisons between literary criticism and anthropological work. Clifford argues that

authoritative works in anthropology are better described as "contingent fictions" than as signifiers with a close, non-arbitrary connection with their signified. The anthropologist constructs a meaning of the culture he or she studies, informed by his or her own experiences and cultural perceptions.

Thus, Geertz explains the function of anthropology this way: "Understanding a people's culture exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity. (The more I manage to follow what the Moroccans are up to, the more logical, and the more singular, they seem.) It renders them accessible: setting them in the frame of their own banalities, it dissolves their opacity" (14). In other words, though the anthropologist is indeed constructing a story of the culture being studied, he or she is trying to make the "oddities" of the culture take on a logical cast (from the anthropologist's own culture's point of view) in order to pave the way to constructive communication between the two cultures.

The premise of this study is that children's book authors are, at least partially, ethnographers, gathering together "thick description" of the culture of school as perceived by children. We accept that the stories are filtered through the author's own paradigms and that therefore their stories are doubly contingent

fictions. However, these "ethnographies" still have much to offer. We will look at how authors go about gaining proximity to the child's-eye view of school, and how we, as anthropologists/literary critics, might constructively approach their descriptions.

3.2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The literary analysis we are about to embark upon will also indirectly draw on some tenets of critical discourse analysis as described by Thomas Huckin. Critical discourse analysis, he says,

- Gives special attention to underlying factors of ideology, power, and resistance;
- Is grounded in a close, detailed inspection of texts;
- Takes into account omissions, implications, presuppositions, ambiguities, and other covert but powerful aspects of discourse; and
- Takes an ethical stance against power abuses and social injustice. (156)

Although the books I will analyze have been prepared for publication and formally transmitted in text and thereby are not *conversational* mediums, both of these print genres are located within a socially constructed reality that gives them their efficacy.

Some branches of CDA focus mostly on linguistics and grammar usage, what Gee has called little "d" discourse. As Rogers has written,

> There are more and less textually oriented approaches to discourse analysis. Some methods are less linguistically focused and more focused on the context in which the discourse arises. Other methods are interested in the historical emergence of a set of concepts or policies. Other methods pay equal attention to language and social theory. (6)

We will focus on uppercase "D" discourse, dealing with the ideologies, assumptions, and effects of both the text and the context wherein the text was created and has meaning.

Contextual factors are absolutely vital here because the power of the discourse is not located strictly within the texts themselves but comes equally from the culture's normative social practices that "surround" the discourse. Thus, we will not only examine the texts' assertions and silences concerning power and relationship, we will also look at the social milieu of school and how that context can help us interpret the texts.

3.2.2 Point of View

We can begin with the authors' own perspective and the experiences that they project onto the constructed reality. An author may or may not try to suppress personal attitudes within the narrative, but total suppression isn't likely (if possible at all), and therefore some of the composite beliefs, values, and experiences that make up the author—a real subject—flavor the literary construction. With children's literature, an imagined audience also plays a large role in how reality is constructed. Generally, authors take one of two approaches. The first of these approaches is didacticism.

The didactic, or top-down, approach sees the author as an adult in a didactic role that may be more or less blatant. For example, as was typical of the times, Louisa May Alcott uses the didactic perspective in her writing as she adds value judgments to her characters' actions such as "wisely." This didacticism is also shown in books like *Eight Cousins* when Alcott's own adult perspectives attempt to instruct her readers in the foolishness of unhealthy fashions when Rose wears a wide, corset-like belt and is helped by her uncle to see that style should not trump health. After Rose runs upstairs, her uncle catches her panting and reprimands her:

> "That belt is too tight; unfasten it, then you can take a long breath without panting so."
>
> "It isn't tight, sir; I can breathe perfectly well," began Rose, trying to compose herself.
>
> Her uncle's only answer was to lift her up and unhook the new belt of which she was so proud. The moment the clasp was open the belt flew apart several inches, for it was impossible to restrain the involuntary sigh of relief that flatly contradicted her words. [...]
>
> "If you dear little girls would only learn what real beauty is, and not pinch and starve and bleach yourselves out so, you'd save an immense deal of time and money and pain. A happy soul in a healthy body makes the best sort of beauty for man or woman. Do you understand that, my dear?" (Alcott NP)

Use of a didactic voice is a stylistic choice that places the author in the role of teacher to the reader. Rose's uncle expresses views that Alcott espoused. In addition to entertaining, she wished to instruct and be an influence for good. The intent of instructing her readers means that she is less likely to reflect reality as she sees it, but she depicts it as she wants it to become. Since finding reality

reflected in the depiction of the author is our concern with this survey, a didactic-narrative approach is less useful.

When the author does not purport to instruct children in ethical, moral, or socially acceptable behavior, he or she is using a sympathetic approach. This bottom-up approach finds the author in sympathy with the child reader. The author enters in to the child's perspective, values, and culture. Maurice Sendak and Dav Pilkey are two good examples of this sympathetic approach to writing. One clue to the whole-hearted sympathy that is extended by Sendak and Pilkey and which is accepted by their target audience of young readers is the fact that young people like their books while adults do not.

While it is now quite popular, when Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* first came out, it encountered significant misgivings on the part of parents and teachers, who were approaching the literature from a top-down, teaching point of view: "Kids like it, but is it a good influence on them?" No one was sure.

In the familiar story of Max, who wears his wolf suit, makes mischief, and becomes king of the wild things, Sendak mentally kneels down to see Max on his level, rather than looking down from his lofty adult position. Max makes mischief and becomes king of

the wild things, and Sendak does not interfere. Sendak does not impose any value judgments or offer any advice to the readers about whether or not Max's behavior is appropriate. Sendak merely attempts to accurately depict the psychological state of a young boy who is upset with his mother and who deals with his internal frustration by becoming a "wild thing."

While Max does symbolically make peace with his mother by coming home and finding that his supper is still hot, Sendak never points out any sort of lesson that Max learned or in any way lets Max lose face. Sendak intentionally does not filter the world to make it nicer or to instruct children on how to deal with it. Rather, by giving a symbolic interpretation of a child's reality as he sees it, he gives children a psychological tool to make sense of the world around them (Sipe).

The *Captain Underpants* series is still relatively new on the market, and once again, parents don't buy the books full of silly jokes, body humor, and disrespect of authority figures to be a moral example for their children. My point in using these particular controversial books is to point out that if parents and teachers don't like them, but children read them enough that they sell millions of

copies, then the only logical conclusion is that there is something in these books that young readers connect with.

The distinction between these two techniques is significant to our study because we need to acknowledge the part the adult author plays and recognize that some books are written at least partially to instruct children and others are written to identify with children. While all can illuminate the relationship between children, teachers, school, and the culture that informs those relationships, knowing when the text is sympathetic and when it is didactic will allow us to use a more accurate lens to see what the books are saying about school from the child's point of view.

In describing their research methodology, Kleinfeld et al. pointed out that students were "quite knowledgeable judges of teachers" ("Doing Research" 12). In using sympathetic children's literature, I hope to uncover aspects of education and school that children know and identify with, but are rarely asked about.

3.3 Validity and Reliability

One of the difficulties of studying children is their lack of sophistication and abstraction. If we ask them to explain why and how, they may not answer—or not in ways that answer what we

think we are asking. You might say that adults and children do not share the same "mythology." In John Moore's book, *Interpreting Young Adult Literature: Literary Theory in the Secondary Classroom,* he includes a discussion on the nature of symbols and mythology in the meeting of story and reality.

> What we call social 'reality' is a human construct, the product of a cultural *mythology* that intervenes between our minds and the world we experience. Such cultural myths reflect the values and ideological interests of their builders, not the laws of nature or logic. (58)

What I am proposing is a look into the "mythology" of children, and specifically mythology involving school to give us a look at the views that shape and are shaped by young readers. A literary analysis of works by a particular group yields insight into the workings a community: Muslims in Europe, African-Americans, contemporary Asian women, Victorian men etc. are groups of people who could all be approached through their literature. Contemporary North American children, however, pose a different challenge because with few exceptions (and depending on what age childhood is defined at) children have little published literature of their own.

They certainly don't have a widely-accessible, published body of work that is written by children, read by children, and commented on by children. By the time they develop the requisite motor skills, literacy, and abstract thinking skills to create publishable texts, they aren't children any more. Such possible exceptions as Mary Shelly and Christopher Paolini provide interesting studies in themselves, but hardly give us a broad base for comparison.

If we are going to analyze a literature that speaks to children's perceptions of school, I am hoping that one way to catch a glimpse of the workings of the school society is through the stories they read voluntarily. Since books for children are written by adults, then care is needed to distinguish between books written to instruct children and books written in sympathy with the child state.

I do not intend to pejoratively label books that are instructional. Of course there is a whole spectrum available with one example of the extreme being didactic Victorian books showing naughty children being eaten by bears and good children rising to Heaven while lisping Psalms. There are other authors, however, who help children to make sense of society or provide a format for more interesting educational material.

In other books, the author attempts to shrink, like Alice does, so that they can once again go through the rabbit hole of childhood and re-enter a child's perspective in telling the story. Because this second style of writing gives us the best insight into what writings coincide with children's opinions (rather than attempting to shape their opinions), we will focus on the "bottom up" writing rather than the "top down" narrative style.

3.4 Proximity

In writing, the proximity between the author, narrator, character(s), and reader varies in ways that affect whether the narrative style is explanatory or exploratory. For example, drama uses close proximity between character and reader. If someone falls down in a drama, the reader takes it seriously, and is aware of the effects of pain, the inhibition to the character reaching a goal, etc. Humor puts more distance between the character and the reader so that the irony or absurdity of the situation is perceivable. If a character falls down in a comedy, the reader finds the situation funny. To put it in Mel Brooks' famous words, "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die" (par. 1).

How closely aligned the narrator and the characters are creates a subtle, but significant difference in how the world of the story is perceived by the reader. If the narrator has already (fictionally or really) experienced the events of the story, or has control of the themes being explored, then there is greater distance between the narrator and characters.

In Jane Austen's Emma, for example, the narrator at times gently pokes fun at the characters, such as when she steps away from Emma's side for a moment to express her doubts that even Harriet Smith could be in love with more than three men in one year. The statement is ironic and humorous because the narrator has already established the inevitability of Harriet's being romantically connected with *someone* by the end of the book.

On the other hand, a close alignment will produce a single (or at least overlapping) view of the events, settings, etc. In adult literature, an example would be The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien. In this book about war, both the author and narrator are trying to make sense of what is going on with the story, and with the effects of war in general. O'Brien writes from within the story. Often, an author writes from within the story if it is nonfiction or based on an experienced trauma because the creation of the book is

the author's way of coming to terms with the events experienced. Even in fiction, if the story is a metaphor for events, themes, or philosophies in the author's life, the writing can act as a space for thinking through and working out the ideas or emotions. Naturally, anything the author has difficulty with is more likely to produce writing of this kind. If the author has already come to terms with events or ideas, then the writing will have greater distance.

The contrast is easier to see in adult literature because while all adults have at least survived childhood, and so are in one sense beyond it, very few books are written by post-adults. The themes of adulthood—often problems that need to be worked through—are presented in all their confusion and messiness. While the author should have control of the structure of the book, the theme does not need to be neatly packaged with an answer ready. Writing is explanatory when the author has come to terms with the theme, or has figured out the answer to the problem.

Of course, most books are not absolutes of one kind or the other. For example, it is not uncommon for an author to write about experiences as a child, but allow the narrator to be the adult self that he or she is now, as seen in Alcott's work. Parts of the story will bring out the voice of the narrator showing the insight and irony

of hindsight, while other parts of the story will be immersed in the experiences of the child. A shift to a closer proximity gives more dramatic weight to those experiences and cues the reader to take the story seriously.

When both the character and the reader are children, however, proximity poses interesting options for a text. At least some distance between the author and reader is unavoidable. Generally, authors are adults and hence there must be a significant amount of distance in age, height, and role in society from the experiences of a child. When an author is in close proximity with the narrator and with the reader, however, then the adult can present characters and a story that the reader identifies with.

Hayao Miyazaki is one of those adults who insists on aligning himself with the child-perspective. In commenting on the difference between his work and that of John Lasseter (of Toy Story fame) Miyazaki says, "Lasseter wants to guide children. I'm lost along with the children." And the theme for the Ghibil Museum (which Miyazaki conceived) is "Let's Lose Our Way, Together" (Johnston).

One good example of proximity is to juxtapose the series, *The Magic Tree House* with *Captain Underpants.* I choose these two examples because of how popular they are in my household. Every

book in both series has been devoured by my eight-year-old son. He enjoys dazzling me with facts he learns from *The Magic Tree House*, and shocking me with the jokes from *Captain Underpants*. *Magic Tree House* is fun for learning things; *Captain Underpants* is fun for expression.

In *Magic Tree House*, Mary Pope Osbourne's author persona is an adult telling a story that keeps children's interest while teaching about a particular time period, or historical event. Jack and Annie use the tree house to magically enter another context (or possibly a curriculum unit) about the moon, the pilgrims, natural disasters, or other science and social studies concepts that a second/third grade audience would do well to learn about: Osbourne has even added research guides for further study on related topics. *Magic Tree House* books supplement the classroom, and are at home as a tool inside the workings of the school.

By contrast, *Captain Underpants*, is a fourth/fifth grade critique of school. The principal and teachers are at best unsympathetic adults who are so aligned with the school and its values that they inherently like anything boring or involving work. In *Captain Underpants and the Wrath of the Wicked Wedgie-Woman,*

the teacher, Ms. Ribble, not only has a symbolic name, but her favorite flavor of ice cream is chunky tofu.

It is easy for the reader to suspect Dav Pilkey of being a larger-sized version of Harold and/or George, his mischievous protagonists. Pilkey doesn't attempt to teach anything except, perhaps, how to make a "squishie" (see *Captain Underpants and the Big, Bad Battle of the Bionic Booger Boy Part 1: The Night of the Nasty Nostril Nuggets,* 2003). As author and narrator, Pilkey has advice not for how to gain approval of authority figures, but how to get around or subvert them. The distance between author, narrator, characters, and reader is definitely slimmed down to conspiratorial levels.

The goal of this analysis is to examine children's perceptions of school. And as we see, close proximity is more likely to give us the perspective of a child rather than that of an adult teaching a child, or explaining past experiences as a child. Not all the books I have chosen use proximity as close as that used in *Captain Underpants,* but there is an element of sympathy and an attempt on the author's part to understand the story from the child's perspective. In theory, once having been a member of the child-tribe would qualify adults to be child-anthropologists. However, memory is a fickle thing, and the

commonness of the expression "You don't understand," ought to give us some clue about the severity of the decree that adults can no longer find their way to Neverland. Some authors, however, keep trying.

3.5 Data Collection

The works I chose for analysis were selected primarily for their popularity among children. Some works are contemporary, having been published within the last few years. Others works have enjoyed long-term popularity. Popularity was determined by finding titles which came up again and again in typical points of entry into literature. I considered physical bookstores, both chain and independent. I consulted online sellers such as Amazon and Audible. In addition, I asked children's librarians and children for what titles were popular. Combined with this was examining the number of copies sold. Books that had sold over a million copies or which had been in print for over fifty years were likely candidates; children's book titles which were recognized by non-children's book readers were also considered. Some of the titles are perhaps "better literature" than others. Books which are considered classics or which have won Newberry prizes are more likely to contain the depth

necessary for instructive analysis. However, a few books, such as the *Captain Underpants* series were chosen not for their literary merit, but for their popularity with children despite adult disapproval.

Simply to make the selection of titles more manageable, I chose to keep my focus to an elementary school level, where my training as a teacher lies. The selection of books came from the middle grade (ages 8-12) reading category. Of course, the books selected are mostly about school, and all have what I felt was important commentary about aspects of school and/or learning. While the list of books included could be much larger, ultimately any list becomes too unwieldy, and eventually I had to leave things out.

The following list is a partial one and does not attempt to include all works included in the analysis, but it does include works of primary focus. Obviously, when a series is involved, all books are relevant to the overall theme and in examining common elements, but in the interest of brevity, I have only listed the works that involve a close reading below:

- *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*, by Dav Pilkey

- *Captain Underpants and the Big, Bad Battle of the Bionic Booger Boy, Part 1: The Night of the Nasty Nostril Nuggets*, by Dav Pilkey
- *Captain Underpants and the Big, Bad Battle of the Bionic Booger Boy, Part 2: The Revenge of the Ridiculous Robo-Boogers*, by Dav Pilkey
- *Junie B., First Grader: Shipwrecked*, by Barbara Park
- *Junie B. Jones and the Mushy Gushy Valentine*, by Barbara Park
- *Anne of Green Gables*, by L.M. Montgomery
- *Ramona Quimby, Age 8*, by Beverly Cleary
- *Ramona the Brave*, by Beverly Cleary
- *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, by J.K. Rowling
- *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, by J.K. Rowling
- *Artemis Fowl*, by Eoin Colfer
- *Monster*, by Walter Dean Meyers
- *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle*, by Betty MacDonald
- *Frindle*, by Andrew Clements
- *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, by C.S. Lewis
- *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, by C.S. Lewis

I have attempted to use a variety of types of works with more attention paid to an approximately equal number of books with male and female protagonists than to finding a wide cultural base. Part of the reason for this is that there are simply fewer books with protagonists from ethnic minorities. Often, widely-read books about ethnic minorities have culturally-based plots that have little or nothing to do with school. While hopefully the diversity of ways that various cultures are represented will increase, at the present, since our primary concern is with the representation of school, I felt that the more prudent route was to select highly popular books, even though this left minority populations under-represented. For reasons of cultural elements, some of the books chosen were less popular, but had important view points on the implications of ethnicity and school.

It was possible, however, to pay attention to gender representation, and to consider typical themes in books with male versus female protagonists. While not deliberately focusing on gender studies, when I compared multiple texts, common themes continually surfaced in books according to gender of protagonist, and so I felt obliged to address the themes accordingly.

3.6 Approach to Data Analysis

With literary analysis, there is no definitive interpretation of a work. Rather, literature is a lens through which the world may be viewed with fresh perspective and enhanced clarity. While conventions of literary theory have been followed, using primarily a new criticism orientation for textual analysis, I have attempted to integrate my experiences as an educator to direct my search for cultural implications of the texts examined. This particular literary study is a practical search for insights that a sifting of stories can give about the nature of children's interactions with the context of school. I see this study tying in closely with contemporary educational theories with an anthropological background. You will, however, notice strong elements of cultural studies, as well its forebears, Marxism and feminism. My reasoning for using a hybrid of these approaches is covered in the literature review.

Using literature as a point of meditation is certainly not a new idea. In adult literature it is common practice to analyze literature to see what it says about psychology or culture. Feminist criticism, psychoanalytic studies, and post-colonial criticism are all forms of literary criticism that grew out of the new criticism movement (Bressler 89,104). Each specialty of criticism studies what literature

by or for the target population is saying. For example, feminist criticism is interested in what literature says about women's bodies, roles and powers (Bressler 109). Educational criticism, then, seeks to understand what literature says about school and learning.

Cultural studies grew out of the interdisciplinary writings of scholars in many fields examining popular stories to see what can be gathered about cultural norms and deviations (Storey 4). Sometimes those stories take the place of unwritten folk tales from a non-European culture such as the Athabascan perspective.

For example, a story that involves boys from age ten or so on living apart in a male house tells us about the cultural norms of the storyteller in terms of gender roles and child development. When we add to the story that an old woman who is angry with the boys pretends to be a ghost and crawls around to frighten the boys tells us more about mysticism and other cultural elements of the population represented (Keithahn 80). As we add elements, we begin to see a picture of interrelated beliefs, behaviors, and other cultural elements.

In other fields, scholars might look at literature written by biologists in Britain to find out what the cultural norms of their sub-culture are (within the larger culture of Britain, Europe, the

scientific community etc.) and how they define themselves against or with the larger population, taking into account that interpretation is needed to see the implicit elements that are not given at face value in the text (Latour and Woolgar). For example, people within a subculture might write about themselves differently than people from outside of the culture might write about that culture. Still, even with imperfections, a literary study can prove highly informative by showing what is said to, by, and about a sample population.

Children's literature, especially fairy tales, has been the focus of psychological study by people such as Bruno Bettleheim, Marina Warner, and others. Bettleheim's idea (heavily influenced by Freud) is that fairy tales represent parts of the child psyche that children don't necessarily want to look at directly. The *once upon a time* frame gives the child a safe psychological vantage point to explore aspects of the id and elements of development (45). For example, the genie in the bottle represents a child's anger. The genie first thinks to reward the human who sets him free, but with the passing of years moves to anger and punishment for the person who frees him (32). The psychological aspect is the same with children who wait for a favor or the presence of an adult. However, if the child is

not ready to see him/herself as the genie, the cloak of "it's just a story" keeps the message subliminal. By understanding the themes and psychological elements of fairy tales, Bettleheim suggests that adults can better understand children, and can reinforce development through the presentation of appropriate stories.

My proposition is similar to Bettleheim's, though with a different focus. Fairy tales were not invented by children, but were embraced and preserved by and for children even after the original adult audience no longer participated. Today, most children lack the skill and connections to publish novels that they have written, but there certainly is a large body of work that they take ownership of. Through examination of some of this work, we can learn about children, school, and the relationship between the two.

3.7 Background of the Researcher

While in my pre-services education classes at Brigham Young University, I was struck by the black and white choices (it seemed to me at the time) for classroom management. It was my understanding at the time that whether I practiced coercion or became a friendly dictator, I must inevitably cajole, threaten, or

entertain students into completing "learning activities" when they would much rather be doing something else.

My reflection on the nature of formal education deepened when I worked in Escuela Dublán, in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico, as a student teacher. Due to a sudden teacher-shortage, I found myself without a supervising teacher and, surprisingly, enjoying myself immensely. In a tiny room with thirty-two students and next to no resources, I found my teaching to be much more effective and pleasurable than it had been in an upper-middle-class school in the U.S. For a long time, I wondered about what made the difference.

I continued wondering about the nature of education as I worked developing independent study courses, homeschooling children (some my own and others not), teaching college English, and other activities dealing with education in a wide variety of aspects over the course of the next eight years.

In 2004, I found myself in a grant project with the exciting task of helping rural Alaskan schools develop their knowledge of how to incorporate technology into their curriculum. In my crash-course of cultural awareness in education, I strove to understand the educational impact of mixing traditional Alaskan and

contemporary U.S. culture. Sometimes the hybrid was more graceful than at other times. I learned that many of the problems Alaska faced with education today were variations of original problems American public education had limped along with since schools were first introduced.

Again I found myself gnawing on the old question of the nature of education and how school worked, or failed to work, as a learning environment. While my studies of Alaskan culture have not made me comfortable in taking on the title of expert in any way, still they have deepened my understanding of education and how the culture that currently drives K-12 public education does not have to be the only model. I cannot believe that any culture is inherently a bad educational context, but I must believe that any culture will be more effective as it becomes self-reflective. By looking outside ourselves and then returning to look inward, we see with new eyes and perhaps find new approaches to old problems.

Literature has always been the tool of examination and of seeing the self anew through the stories of others. Books give us the power of vicarious experience, and children's literature is exceptional in its power to accept experiences that adopts new vision by embracing the impossible or the silly. Not only that, but serious

or comic, children's literature insists on using play as a medium for learning, for children's literature loves to have fun. That aspect in itself teaches us an invaluable lesson about how children learn best.

As I have wrestled with education and school over the years, I found myself in a similar position to Jacob wrestling the angel: the struggle was great and terrible, with tantalizing promise and immediate pain. I found myself turning more and more frequently to the metaphors in stories to explain what I was trying to understand and consider.

When planning teaching of my own, I found myself returning to stories to see what would work and what wouldn't. Eventually, I came to realize anew that the literary analysis I had been trained in during previous graduate work was not a dusty academic exercise but a practical approach to understanding real problems and finding contemporary applications for theory. Finally, I became convinced that telling and retelling stories can give us a foundation for making sense of the chaos of our own lives and culture and to organize random elements into meaningful stories of our own.

3.8 Summary

School does not often get a good representation in children's literature, moreover school is absent in many books where it would take up a high percentage of the child's life if the work were a chronology. Obviously, some of these omissions are for dramatic elements; if school goes on peacefully with no tension, then there is no story and no reason to put it in the book. However, there are plenty of books where children define themselves against school or get away from school in order to find an appropriate learning situation. An analysis of books that children read provides insight not only into school, but also education and learning. What types of learning do children do well with? What educational settings and methods succeed? Do those elements overlap with school settings, and when they don't, why don't they?

CHAPTER 4

DATA PRESENTATION

In this chapter, the primary works used for the analysis are presented. Data includes an overview of the work or works, not necessarily from the perspective of a plot summary, but to give a context for the books as significant with regard to time period, character development, acceptance by various audiences, and so on. The presentation also includes a list of all titles in a series or representative titles when the list is cumbersome.

4.1 Anne of Green Gables

Anne of Green Gables has remained popular for a hundred years and draws 350,000 tourists annually to see the Green Gables House where author L.M. Montgomery lived (http://www.gov.pe.ca/lmm/index.php3). The book is set in Prince Edward Island, Canada and tells the adventures and misadventures of Anne Shirley, a little orphan girl.

Anne's parents were both teachers, but died of illness when the girl was a baby. Anne is raised in various low-income, dysfunctional families where she began earning her keep at an early

age by doing housework and looking after children. At age eleven, Anne is sent to an orphanage where she resides for several months before a miscommunication starts her on the path that will lead to her unlikely new family.

Matthew and Marilla Cuthbert are aging siblings who live together at Green Gables. Mathew runs the farm in a shy and quiet way, and Marilla runs the house in a severe, no-nonsense style. Due to Mathew's age, they decide to adopt a boy from the orphanage to help out on the farm. A miscommunication sends them Anne instead.

Anne's combination of intelligence, melodrama, earnestness, willingness, and unintentional calamities soon win the Cuthberts' hearts, and they decide not to send her away. The book chronicles Anne's well-intentioned disasters as her distractions into the realm of imagination and her mixture of kind soul and hot temper continually get her into trouble. She accidentally intoxicates her best friend, dies her hair green, falls off a roof, and other adventures. At school, Anne finds more ways to get herself into trouble. After being teased by flirtatious boy, Anne becomes furious and smashes her slate on the boy's head. When the school teacher is looking for a scapegoat, Anne's wreath of flowers sets her apart

from the other students and she is marked for punishment while a large group of students escapes.

Gradually, Anne learns from her escapades, and she proves herself studious in spite of interruptions. She proves an invaluable help to Mathew and Marilla both with helping at Green Gables and providing a new point of attachment for the two adults who had never had a child to care about before. Structurally, Marilla is the character with the strongest arch; she gradually softens under Anne's relentless influence and develops both love and her sense of humor.

Anne of Green Gables is followed by several other books following Anne through her further education, teaching career, marriage and children, etc. They include *Anne of Avonlea, Anne of the Island, Anne of Windy Poplars, Anne's House of Dreams, Anne of Ingleside, Rainbow Valley,* and *Rilla of Ingleside.*

4. 2 Ramona Quimby

Ramona Geraldine Quimby was created by Beverly Cleary as a very young child who annoyed her big sister, Beatrice (Beezus). Ramona's dynamic personality developed, and eventually, Ramona

became the star of her own collection of books that are perhaps the best-known of all Cleary's large body of work.

The titles of the *Ramona* books give insight into Ramona's character development over the years. The books represent roughly one year each with later books corresponding to school years. *Beezus and Ramona, Ramona the Pest, Ramona the Brave, Ramona Quimby, Age 8, Ramona Forever, and Ramona's World* as well as *Ramona and Her Mother* and *Ramona and Her Father.* With *Beezus and Ramona,* Ramona is only a four-year-old who terrorizes her big sister. As the books continue, Ramona still has more of her share of trouble and misunderstandings, but she gradually (and painfully) learns the rules that the rest of the world runs by. In *Ramona's World,* Ramona is in fourth grade and is better able to manage teachers, parents and friends, although life still jumps out at her in unexpected ways such as the time that she was playing at a friend's house and their attic game resulted in Ramona falling through the living room ceiling.

The *Ramona* books are all about how Ramona struggles to fit in with society. She has to learn to adapt to family life initially, and then at age five, she has to also learn to adapt to school. Initially, rules about correct social behavior are frustrating for Ramona.

When her teacher tells her to sit in her desk for the present, Ramona is crushed when she finds out that she doesn't actually get a gift. When another girl in the class has long, beautiful, ringlets, Ramona doesn't understand why she isn't allowed to pull the curls that work just like a spring—*boing!* Later on, Ramona has to deal with a boy who is a Yard Ape (Ramona's nickname for the sort of boy who is loud and teasing on the playground) and who steals her eraser. She suffers public humiliation when everyone is smashing hard-boiled eggs on their heads at lunchtime—and hers turns out to be raw. During the middle two or three books, Ramona's largest concerns are with her teacher and whether or not Ramona is accepted, since she so often feels like she is in disgrace through an unfair turn of events. If only adults understood Ramona, then they would know why she acted the way she did. In a few places, the adults learn more about Ramona, but mostly she gradually learns about them, and adapts her behavior from a wild ball of energy and imagination to a focused girl that her mother can count on.

4.3 Junie B. Jones

Barbara Park's Junie B. is a spunky girl who can get into just as much trouble as either Anne or Ramona, although in her own

style. If Anne was a hundred years ago, and Ramona was fifty years ago, then Junie B. is the contemporary queen of miscommunication. While some adults worry that Junie B. will encourage children to be rude or to disrespect authority, many others agree that she is a funny and accurate interpretation of the troubles enthusiastic girls have adjusting to school and the world around them.

In her first adventure, *Junie B. Jones and the Stupid, Smelly Bus*, Junie B. starts kindergarten. The first day is eventful; Junie B. does not like the smell of the bus on the way to school, and does not like the color yellow because she was forced to sit in a yellow chair when another girl took the red chair. Junie B.'s desk mate informs her that kids get chocolate milk poured on their heads, so the motivation to avoid the bus is even stronger.

Since she is at the back of the line as the other children get ready to go home, it is a simple matter for her to stay behind in the classroom and hide in the supply closet. Once inside, Junie B. falls asleep, which gives everyone time to leave the building. Junie B. then proceeds to explore the school. She helps herself to band-aids in the nurse's office, gums up the pencil sharpener with a red crayon while she is in the library, and eventually calls the one phone number she knows: 911. Junie B. does end up with an emergency—

a bathroom emergency, and the janitor saves the day just before the fire department and an angry mother show up.

Junie B. continues to interpret life in her own way through kindergarten and on in to first grade. She is a mistress of frustrating adults, sometimes because of young-child stubbornness, and sometimes because her enthusiastic way of approaching the world does not overlap with adults' perceptions of reality. Sometimes the plots involve learning a lesson.

For example, in *Junie B. Jones Loves Handsome Warren*, Junie B. tries to have the clothes and accessories that her friends do so that she can be the best at impressing Warren, the new boy. In the end, they become friends because her personality and persistent efforts make him laugh. They both agree to being goof balls and the book ends happily. In other books, such as *Junie B. Jones is a Graduation Girl*, Junie B. has a misadventure which requires putting the world back in balance, but there isn't an easily-spotted moral to the story.

The *Junie B.* books are on a lower reading-level than either *Anne* or *Ramona*, which gives Park room for multiple, short volumes. Currently there are over 25 books and more on the way.

4.4 Captain Underpants

Dav Pilkey, author of such questionable literary gems as *The Dumb Bunnies* and *Super Diaper Baby,* hit a market thirsty for high-interest, low-reading-level books with his *Captain Underpants* series. Pilkey's unabashedly crude and lengthy titles give a flavor for the text and illustrations inside. Pilkey publishes with Scholastic and sells millions of copies. All of his works do well, but the *Captain Underpants* series is the most popular. There are seven books to date and plans for more:

1. *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*
2. *Captain Underpants and the Attack of the Talking Toilets*
3. *Captain Underpants and the Invasion of the Incredibly Naughty Cafeteria Ladies from Outer Space (and the Subsequent Assault of the Equally Evil Lunchroom Zombie Nerds)*
4. *Captain Underpants and the Perilous Plot of Professor Poopypants*
5. *Captain Underpants and the Wrath of the Wicked Wedgie-Woman*
6. *Captain Underpants and the Big, Bad Battle of the Bionic Booger Boy Part 1*

7. *Captain Underpants and the Big, Bad Battle of the Bionic Booger Boy Part 2*

The bathroom humor and conflict with authority are obvious red flags for conservative parents and educators, but the problem is that the books really are funny. Pilkey has a nice pace, an ironic self-awareness, and a touch of deconstructionism in his approach to the stories. All of the books take place primarily at school. In general, the school is openly hostile, with a principal who hates the boys for their creative pranks and a teacher, Ms. Ribble, who matches her name and wants her students to feel the same way.

The books are full of improbable, high-tech inventions such as the Combine-O-Tron 2000, which looks like a big ice cream cone but actually has rays that combine selected targets such as a hamster and a bionic robot skeleton. These inventions cause enough trouble (such as when Melvin Sneedly, a humanoid bionic robot skeleton, and a very gooey sneeze are combined—hence, the Bionic Booger Boy), but even more trouble comes when periodic evil scientists (Professor Poopypants) or creatures from outer space (like the sinister Klaxette, Zorxette, and Jenniferette who pose as cafeteria ladies) get into the picture.

Combine all of the classic adventure conventions with a series of pranks, and you get the idea. For example, George and Harold give an excellent classroom demonstration on how to make a "squishie" by folding and securing a ketchup packet under a toilet seat so that the ketchup squirts all over when pressure is applied.

The two friends also liven up the illustrations that complement the text. During moments of exposition or occasionally even chase scenes, George and Harold pause to change around the letters of the many movable-text marquees that are abundant in Pilkey's world. These creative spelling exercises are usually full of bathroom humor and are often something that a conservative adult would avoid reading aloud. For example, the sign "CHECK OUT OUR SCHOOL'S BIG INTERNET WEBSITE AT WWW.JHES.COM!" becomes "WE SHAKE OUR BIG BUTTS WHEN WE SWIM IN THE TOILET" after George and Harold have finished with it (Booger Boy, Part 2 76-78).

Generally, the values are broad, and saving the world is the order of the day. However, just as George and Harold finish setting the world to rights, one more creature crawls out of the corner and we end with a cry of "Oh no! Here we go again!"

While some adults may balk at these books, someone buys millions of copies, and some parents give in when boys who have

never voluntarily read a book before gobble up the volumes and ask for more. Pilkey, who himself was a "poor" student until a college professor noticed and actually encouraged his comic books, seems to identify with the unlikely elementary scholars and communicates in spite of using text as the medium.

4.5 Harry Potter

Anyone who needs an overview of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books is in a minority since adult and children read these books, re-read them, watch the movies, and wait impatiently for the next one. Much as J.R.R. Tolkein's books have done, *Potter* books have achieved two things: they bridge a generational gap of readers, and they have strengthened a market for longer children's books, especially in the fantasy genre. Such followers as Christopher Paolini's *Eragon* and *Eldest* as well as Jonathan Stroud's *Bartimaeus Trilogy* and Angie Sage's *Septimus Heap* books ride, at least in length, on the coat-tails of the prolific Rowling. Another first for the series is the previously unheard phenomenon of a children's book becoming a bestseller before it is released. Since *Harry Potter* books have become ubiquitous, it is common for pre-ordering of anticipated books.

The basic idea of *Harry Potter* is that magic is real, and there is a wizard and witch community that exists without non-magical people, or muggles, knowing about it. At the beginning of the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in the UK), Harry lives with his aunt, uncle, and cousin. They are neglectful, bordering on abusive. However, a series of letters eventually reaches Harry and inform him that he is a wizard and has been accepted to Hogwarts, a boarding school for wizards and witches. Each book corresponds with a school year as Harry leaves the distasteful home of his relatives, and most of the stories take place after Harry gets away from the muggle world.

In spite of the many benefits of being in the magical community, Harry's new wizard world isn't perfect. Lurking behind each story is the threat of Lord Voldemort, referred to by most wizards as "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named." This evil wizard and his followers, called death eaters, lost power when Voldemort attempted to kill Harry at age one. Due to the protection of his mother's love and life sacrifice, Harry becomes the only one to survive Voldemort's killing curse. Hence, as Voldemort plans his return to power, disposing of Harry Potter is high on his list.

Around the darkness of evil and the consequent complicated politics as leaders try to decide what to do, is the fun, sometimes kooky atmosphere of Hogwarts. Fred and George Weasely, brothers of Harry's best friend, Ron Weasely, add to the levity that balances out the dark forces behind the *Potter* stories. Fred and George are more interested in perfecting their prankster skills than in getting good grades. They work very hard at spells that will make a toy wand punch you in the eye, but they don't care much about following their older brothers' examples of excellent grades and leadership positions.

Eventually, in their seventh and final year at Hogwarts, the twins have a run-in with the new headmistress, Professor Umbridge. Instead of complying or being expelled, the twins call up their broomsticks and ride off in to the sunset. Not to be entirely excluded from subsequent books, Fred and George open a successful joke shop with capital that Harry won in a competition and gave them at the end of the fourth book.

The six books in the series include:

1. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*
2. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*
3. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

4. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*
5. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*
6. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*

A seventh book is scheduled to carry Harry through his final year at Hogwarts.

4.6 Frindle

Andrew Clements tells the story of how Nick Allen and Mrs. Granger battle over a word. At first the word "frindle" is a nonsense word—it is invented, and has no recognized signified. However, after an assignment on the origins of words, Nick decides to try an experiment on inventing a new word. He and his friends begin using the word "frindle" to describe a writing instrument that uses ink.

Mrs. Granger fights back, defending the dictionary and demanding respect for the English language. She sets the word "pen" as a spelling word every week, and every week the fifth grade spell it f-r-i-n-d-l-e. Most of them also have to stay after school every day. Mrs. Granger sets a writing punishment for children using the word "frindle."

However, publicity changes the tide of events. First, the newspaper and then television news interview for the story. Later, a

community member sees the marketing potential of the word and registers it as a trademark, begins selling pens with "frindle" stamped on them, and looks into other frindle merchandise. He also brings a check over to Nick's father.

Over time, Nick's stubbornness and the successful marketing of the word win out. The school year ends, and while the excitement dies down, use of the word "frindle" does not. Ten years pass, and eventually, Mrs. Granger and Nick exchange tokens of mutual respect, one of which is a dictionary Mrs. Granger gives to Nick, a new edition that includes an entry for "frindle."

While this story is clearly a boy versus the institution story, Clements is careful to keep the tension down. Mrs. Granger is disapproving and determined. The principal and Nick's parents are concerned, but nowhere is there an ultimatum for Nick or authority figures that become vilified. Mrs. Granger appears to be the villain for most of the book, but Clements tries to redeem her by arranging the ending to inform Nick and the reader that she intentionally provided opposition in order to encourage Nick to keep going in reverse-psychology style.

While Clements does not have a series, he has a collection of popular (some national bestsellers) books that focus on tensions in

school. A sample list of titles is: *The Laundry News, The Janitor's Boy, The School Story,* and *The Report Card.* His work is based on his teaching experience in the public school system and explores the boundaries of child creativity/identity and adult authority.

4.7 Narnia

C.S. Lewis was a professor and scholar, but the work he is best known for is his seven-volume collection of books about the land of Narnia. The stories are not directly connected to each other. Even when the books have all or some of the same main characters, they read like separate adventures and not like integrated sequels. They do roughly follow the development of all of Narnian history with the first chronological book (though not the first book written) describing the creation of Narnia and the seventh book including the end of Narnia, the deaths of several of the original main characters, and the journey to Aslan's country after death.

Probably the most widely read of the books is the first one, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.* Four children, Lucy, Edmund, Susan, and Peter Pevensie, travel to the country to escape the bombing of London during World War II. The four are sent to the house of a reclusive professor who has a cranky housekeeper.

One rainy day, the four are playing hide and seek. Lucy, the youngest, hides in a large wardrobe, and finds herself in the land of Narnia. She meets with a faun, Mr. Tumnus, and goes home with him to tea, where she learns all about Narnia and the White Witch, who makes it always winter and never Christmas.

On Lucy's third and unintentional visit, the other three come with her and they find themselves involved in a war between the White Witch and the followers of Aslan. Aslan is the great Lion, who is structurally a mentor and symbolically a Christ figure. After many struggles and a fierce battle in the company of talking animals and mytholigically-based characters such as centaurs and dryads, the children defeat the Witch and her forces. They then fill the four thrones in the palace by the sea and reign happily for years until one day when the adult Pevensies stumble upon a barely-remembered path that leads them back through the wardrobe and into our world. Since Narnian time does not take up any of our time, the adults become children again.

Other adventures don't last for quite so many years. Also, other characters are added to the stories both from our world and the Narnian world. As the children grow older, they cease to be allowed back into Narnia. In this way, Lewis is able to have fresh

character development in each story. The chronicles, (in reading order rather than by date of publication) are as follows:

1. *The Magician's Nephew*
2. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*
3. *The Horse and his Boy*
4. *Prince Caspian*
5. *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*
6. *The Silver Chair*
7. *The Last Battle*

4.8 Artemis Fowl

While Eoin Colfer uses mythology in his books, his fairies have nothing to do with flowers, tinkling noises, or anything to do with pastels. The two best words to describe fairies in Colfer's world are "tough" and "technological." According to Colfer, fairies, pixies, goblins, dwarfs and such do exist. However, at some point after the Middle Ages when humans began to multiply, fairies went underground to avoid conflict with the less technologically advanced but more brutal species.

Fairies combine magic (such as healing powers) with technology that would surpass James Bond's wildest dreams. The

only problem is when they run up against a human who is genius enough to outsmart them—a twelve-year-old genius, of course.

Artemis Fowl is the heir of Fowl Manor, a legacy of Fowls who have made their fortune in ethical—if not exactly legal—business dealings. While still healthy, the family bank accounts are not what they once were. Besides that, Artemis' father is missing and his mother lives in a fantasy world. Fowl, then, is in charge of the family affairs. He has done his homework and, with the help of his impressively trained and massive bodyguard, Butler, he set in motion a plan to kidnap a fairy and then return the hostage in exchange for one metric ton of gold.

The fairy he happens to kidnap is Holly Short, a tough officer in the LEP (Lower Elements Police) recon unit. While in the old days LEPrecons used to wear green hats and shoes with buckles, now they wear stealth suits, electronic wings, and a variety of cool weapons and gadgets. She and her commander, Julius Root, are almost a match for Fowl. Eventually, Fowl's unanticipated guilt and shared traumatic experiences (such as fighting a massive troll) and the healing Holly performs on Fowl's mother convinces him to release Holly with half of her ransom and for them part as not quite friends, but with a healthy respect for each other.

In the second book *The Arctic Incident*, a goblin uprising underground forces the LEP to ask Fowl for help. In exchange, Fowl asks for help finding his missing father, and coincidentally, the two goals become intertwined. Through the second and the third books, Artemis not only goes through action-packed adventures, but he also begins to develop an interest in morals and relationships that change him into a more humane person and less a calculating criminal. At the end of the third book, *The Eternity Code*, the fairies decide that Artemis knows too much about them. They carry out a selective mind wipe to erase all his memories of the People (as they call themselves). In the fourth book, *The Opal Deception*, it turns out that Fowl's help is needed again to save the fairy world from an evil plot. The only problem is that he can't remember them. Holly is shocked to see how cold and unfeeling Artemis has become without his memories of interaction with fairies. In the end, Artemis gets his memory back and improves his relationship with his parents. Holly and Artemis are friends, and because Holly decides to leave the politics of the force and become a private detective, the future promises many more opportunities for them to work together.

4.9 Monster

Monster (meant for ages 12 and up) by Walter Dean Meyers is a screenplay that the main character, Steve Harmon creates in order to express and work through the experience that he had in being involved with a murder trial. Steve is accused of being an accessory to a robbery during which the store keeper was killed.

In the work, Steve does not plead his own innocence to the reader directly. Even though he manages to be acquitted at the end, the moment of joy turns to dread as he sees the disconnection of his attorney and the doubt in his parents faces. He wonders if even though he has been declared innocent, everyone will see him as a monster.

Most of the screenplay focuses on Steve's experiences in jail and with the legal process. It begins with Steve in jail feeling lonely and scared. The events that lead to the trial are told through the screenplay in a series of remembrances and testimony given during the trial. Again, the screenplay does not automatically take Steve's side, even though it tries to make clear that whether or not Steve is guilty, he is still a young boy who is afraid of being stripped of his humanity by everyone who marks him as a criminal with no other identity possible.

While school only plays a small role in the back story of the screenplay, that role becomes crucial to Steve's ability to make sense of his overwhelming experiences. His teacher, Mr. Sawicki, had the class in the middle of a project where they write and film a documentary about their neighborhood. Steve's work on his project was interrupted by going to jail, obviously, but once there, he used the assignment to write a new version of the project that became the book itself. Steve had been interested in his project previously, but after he is in jail, it becomes a tool to keep his sanity and to help him create some kind of sense from the vortex his life appears to him.

4.10 Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle

Betty MacDonald created a imaginative interpretation of the world through her *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle* books. Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle is a bit like Mary Poppins, but much more laid back. The four books in the series are filled with episodes in which Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle helps cure the various character faults of children. *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle, Hello, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's Magic,* and *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's Farm.*

The structure of all the books is the same. Each chapter is about a child or children in the neighborhood with a certain behavior or character "illness." Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's philosophy is that children are basically good but sometimes they get illnesses. Just like a child would get the flu or the chicken pox, sometimes they become bullies, won't put their toys away, tattle tail, or won't take a bath. Most stories start out with parents who are reaching their wits' end. They know something must be done, but they don't know what. After some fruitless calls around the neighborhood, someone suggests Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle, and the day is saved.

The cures vary quite a bit in type and the extent of their realism. Some involve magic, some involve extraordinary animals, other have special equipment, and some are just good ideas that work out in funny ways. For example, in "The Radish Cure" (*Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle)* Patsy is a nice little girl who does not want to take a bath. Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle suggests that Patsy's mother buy some radish seeds and allow Patsy to avoid baths all together. Within a couple of weeks, enough dirt has collected all over her that she stays home from church to keep from frightening anyone. Fortunately this incident takes place in the summer so school attendance isn't a problem. Following Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's advice, Patsy's mother and

father plant seeds on her arms and face. The radishes grow in a couple of days, and at the horror of seeing herself sprout, Patsy takes a long shower, uses two bars of soap, and is fully cured.

Other episodes are more magical in nature. When Evelyn Rover and Mary Crackle become chronic whisperers who are always hissing gossip behind their hands to each other and driving the rest of the world crazy, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle provides whisper sticks to Mary's mother. The two girls suck on them, and their voices become a permanent whisper so that eventually no one can hear them. Since the girls don't realize why they are being ignored by everyone—including each other—relationship difficulties arise in which whispering is blamed. The girls eventually decide to give up their "hush, hush club" and find more constructive activities.

The slow-eater, tiny-bite taker gets smaller and smaller dishes which fascinate him, but make him so weak from lack of food that he is unable to take his turn at exercising Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's pony. He is convinced to eat a big meal of healthy food and immediately becomes well enough to guide the pony with one hand. The mother of a little girl who answers rudely borrows a parrot who copies all of the rude things so effectively that the girl understands how distasteful it is.

While these books might seem too didactic to carry on in popularity for so many years, the general reaction seems to be that children appreciate seeing the follies of other children and feel smart and virtuous by comparison, perhaps taking mental notes to avoid such behavior in their own lives. The characters' flaws are exaggerated enough that they don't hit too close to home, and the cures are so interesting that the fun is seeing how it will work, not in the tension of whether or not a cure will work.

CHAPTER 5

LITERARY ANALYSIS: ALL THE SCHOOL'S A STAGE

5.1 Introduction

Most books from this study depict a school that has a typical routine and a structure familiar to most or all of the participants. This selection of works proved extremely typical for the larger pool of books I selected works from. In essence, school works in a particular, accepted way, and all or nearly all of the characters in the book are familiar with the routines. Establishing an educational structure or watching a group of people become familiar with a classroom structure does not carry enough dramatic weight to sustain a plot.

Rather, conflict comes chiefly from three sources: school in conflict with a non-school-related element, school as an antagonist the students must defend themselves against, and a single character expressing discomfort with the school structure, but attempting to adapt to the expectations of the school nonetheless. In this chapter we will focus on this third type of school story. It is noteworthy that virtually all of the books I surveyed of this third type have female protagonists. These books depict girls attempting to please the

authority figures, get along with classmates, and conform to the system. However, due to miscommunication, lack of understanding, and the drive of personal needs, these girls have a hard time complying with the system completely.

While books about boys depict deliberate subversion, the books with female protagonists depict unintentional subversion or else they focus on a series of misadventures. Again, without the tension of conflict between the expectations of the establishment and the student, school would be a well-run mechanism without plot value. The fact that similar issues arise repeatedly in these books indicates that the conflict between the cultural norms of the school environment and the personalities and expectations of the students is more likely to occur in real life.

5.2 Not on the Same Page

In the *Junie B. Jones* books by Barbara Park, humor centers on miscommunication and the differences between values and expectations of Junie B. and the adult world. In the first book, *Junie B. Jones and the Stupid, Smelly Bus,* Junie B. begins Kindergarten and gets into trouble when she doesn't understand how school works.

Before school starts, Junie B. and her mother visit the kindergarten classroom and teacher, whom Junie B. calls "Mrs." for short. When Mrs. and Junie B.'s mother begin discussing the bus, Junie B. does not understand the context of the discussion. She knows what a bus is, and that it takes you somewhere, but she does not understand the behaviors required for riding the bus to and from school. At the new idea of riding a bus, she says, "That idea made me feel scary inside. 'Cause I never rided [sic] on a bus before" (5). Consequently, she asks where the bus is going.

The adults, involved in their own conversation, ignore Junie B.'s question. Since the cultural norms of school are familiar to them, they fail to realize Junie B.'s need for socialization. Junie B. escalates her attempts to gain information and finally stamps her foot and yells, "YEAH, ONLY WHERE'S THE STUPID SMELLY BUS GOIN' TO?" (6). Junie B. must resort to unacceptable behavior in order to gain attention and the information she needs in order to attempt to resolve her concerns about the bus.

Stanley William Rothstein, in his book, *Schools and Society*, discusses the idea that teachers "act as agents of the adult community, that they direct the lives of the children inside the urban school" (75). Rothstein focuses on the negative aspects of this

role of socialization in the overall structure of roles in school. The role of the teacher is to dominate, and the role of the student is to be submissive.

Though teachers can use their power to play constructive roles, the fact remains that if any type of culture is to exist, some level of socialization of children must be brought about. The focus of my study is not whether other models of education and society might be an improvement on the current one, but how we can better understand the current structure of education and work more constructively within it.

To this end, it is important to see that Junie B. had to demand information to improve her own socialization within the culture of school. She did not understand bus behavior, and needed more information. When prescribed methods of gaining information were unsuccessful (i.e. asking nicely) she had to resort to a subversive method to gain the adults' attention. Junie B. knew enough about general behavior in her culture to not use screaming as an initial attempt at accessing information. The screaming was a deliberate and calculated breech of acceptable behavior designed to gain attention, albeit negative. Her frustration at not understanding the bus procedure rose to an intolerable level, and the disapproval that

would result from unacceptable acts was preferable to continuing the psychological tension she currently experienced.

Clearly, Junie B. was not intentionally subversive. She was not trying to undermine the school or adult system, and did not attempt to permanently change the power structure. However, she found it necessary to resort to unconventional means to temporarily disrupt the power in a situation that was, to her, intolerable.

Many examples in *Junie B.* and other books with female protagonists involve incidents of apparent subversion or inappropriate behavior, but the behavior does not occur because the girls are unwilling to become socialized in the culture. In books such as *Junie B. Jones*, the female protagonists seek approval from the adult authority figures in the culture and are willing to learn acceptable behavior. Nevertheless, their ignorance of cultural norms coupled with miscommunication results in difficulties for them. Futhermore, even though they are in general willing to conform to cultural demands, they often have inherent desires and values that conflict with the values of the school culture.

5.3 The Effect of Teacher Attitude on School

A classic example of confused communication of values is found in L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, While Anne is eleven years old as the story begins, she has not previously attended school much. After she was orphaned as a baby, she was taken in by a neighbor. The family she lives with is not well off, and Anne must make herself useful in order to keep her place. Her main task is to tend the three sets of twins in the Hammond family, which teaches her skills such as how to nurse a child through the croup, but does not leave much time for school. Anne was only allowed to go to school sporadically because the Hammonds' house was so distant from the school.

Anne's childhood is one of privation, so she builds a dream world around herself for protection. She reads poetry when she can get it, and memorizes poems that she repeats to herself for the comfort of the lyricism and the Romantic ideas they convey. Anne defines herself against her physical surroundings, which are poor, uneducated, and, at times, abusive, by building ideas of beauty and honor based on Romantic poetry such as Tennyson's *The Lady of Shallot.* She is good at imagining away her ugly clothes and unfashionably thin, freckled figure into a lady dressed in satin and

diamonds. Aesthetics in language and ideas are the only elements of her life she has control over.

Eventually, Mr. Hammond dies and Mrs. Hammond breaks up the household. Anne is sent to an orphanage where she relies heavily on her imagination to encourage her through a world of ugliness and cheap materials spread too thin among too many orphans.

The combination of Romantic poetry and neglect among the uneducated proletariat hardly prepares Anne for prim, conservative, protestant Avonlea society she finally finds herself in — especially the expectations of behavior found in the Avonlea school house.

This situation sets the stage for the comical incidents where Anne's expectations conflict with the cultural norms of the school. To guide the reader's interpretation of events, the narrator establishes the motives of Mr. Phillips, the schoolteacher. Montgomery makes it clear that Mr. Phillips acquired his position through nepotism and that he was not especially interested in teaching or in his students. He spends most of his time tutoring Prissy Andrews at the back of the classroom. Prissy is a teenage student who is ostensibly studying for the Queens Academe entrance exam, but there are other students who are studying to

enter Queens, and Mr. Phillips doesn't spend nearly as much time with them.

The narrator further illuminates the character of Mr. Phillips directly by saying that on the afternoon of a particular incident, Mr. Phillips is seized by one of his "spasmodic fits of reform", and warns the class not to be late coming back from lunch (Montgomery "Green Gables" 88). However, when lunch is over and the students do not quite make it back before he does, Mr. Phillips is tired and does not want "the bother of punishing half a dozen students" (90). Rather, he looks for a single student he can punish as an example, even though the students had all run in as a group. Because Anne is wearing a rakish wreath of flowers in her hair, she stands out, and thus becomes the scapegoat.

The punishment of making Anne sit with Gilbert Blythe was not physically harsh, but psychologically, it was humiliating to Anne. Partially, it was humiliating to her because of larger social conventions at the time. As a neighbor and friend, Mrs. Lynde, puts it later, "I don't believe in making the girls sit with the boys for punishment. It isn't modest" (93). Tillie Boulter, another student from the school was also "indignant" about Mr. Phillips' choice of punishment (93).

In addition to the larger cultural expectation that young girls and boys should not mix in that particular way, Anne had a personal grudge against Gilbert Blythe. The previous day, Gilbert had called her "Carrots" in order to get her attention (87). Extremely sensitive of her, at the time, unfashionable hair, Anne had responded with wrath, yelling at him in her rage and cracking her slate over his head. She had vowed never to forgive him. Hence being made to sit with him was additionally humiliating to her overly-developed code of honor.

She kept her head down on her desk, would not speak to anyone, and did not leave her desk for a small-group lesson. When school was over, she collected her belongings and left school, intending never to return.

Indeed, she does not return for a long time. She works at home, but will not return to school until another misadventure motivates her. One afternoon, Anne's best friend, Diana Barry, is invited to tea. The adults being out for a while, Anne serves her friend the raspberry cordial she had been allowed to have for the meal. Anne herself does not drink any, due to her agitation over attempting to complete the cooking preparations without flaw.

As it turned out, Anne had found the wrong bottle and had served Diana current wine instead of raspberry cordial. After three large glasses of wine, Diana falls ill and runs home, where her exceptionally strict mother finds her drunk. Consequently, Anne is decreed a bad influence and not allowed to play with or even speak to Diana. After this event, Anne returns to school so that she can at least look at Diana across the room.

In Anne's world of partially-understood honor and Romance, the insult dealt by Mr. Phillips is intolerable and fundamentally humiliating. The punishment is harsh, but not unendurable by Avonlea's code of propriety, but Anne feels an additional resentment at being punished while none of the other students are, as well as being made particularly to sit with Gilbert, whom she had vowed to hate forever.

If Anne could communicate with Mr. Phillips as she later does with Miss. Stacy (whom Anne adores) then perhaps he and Anne could have come to understand each other's values and been able to compromise in some fashion. However, Mr. Phillips' exclusive focus on behavior and compliance leaves him unable to fulfill the educational or other needs of his students.

Anne does not attend school and would have fallen behind in her studies if she had not been motivated enough to learn in spite of her teacher. Other students' academic skills suffer as well. While Mr. Phillips is at the back of the classroom with Prissy Andrews the other students are left to their own devices, "eating green apples, whispering, drawing pictures on their slates, and driving crickets, harnessed to strings, up and down the aisle" (86). Clearly, Mr. Phillips has several attitudes about teaching that are not conducive to a supportive learning environment. For Anne, his inappropriate and erratic discipline makes the relationship so unbearable that Anne refuses to return to school. Though Anne is obedient to Mr. Phillips authority as a teacher, he alienates her trust and respect.

To complicate Anne's perception of Mr. Phillips as an authority figure, none of the other adult members of the community enlighten Anne that they find his behavior inappropriate for his role as teacher. While community members such as Mrs. Lynde are willing to talk amongst themselves about how it was not "modest" to make the girls sit with the boys and how they disapproved of his teaching in general, Mr. Phillips is a representative of the adult community and so other adults uphold his position, even when he does not fulfill his role well. They can know that Mr. Phillips is an

inappropriate teacher, but it doesn't "do to say so to the children, you know" (93). Thus, while another adult could have helped Anne understand how a teacher's role should be completed and how she was unjustly punished, the other adults uphold the absolute authority of even a poor teacher.

However, Anne is not left forever on her own academically. Later, Miss Stacy works with her in a completely different manner. After they meet, Anne describes the new teacher to Marilla, "I love Miss Stacy with my whole heart, Marilla. She is so ladylike and she has such a sweet voice. When she pronounces my name, I feel *instinctively* that she's spelling it with an *e*" (148-49). There is an interest Miss Stacy shows in her students that not only wins Anne's affection, but also her respect.

When Anne succumbs to an "irresistible temptation" and reads *Ben Hur* during class. Miss Stacy does not humiliate her in front of the other students. She merely takes the book and asks to talk to Anne in private during recess. When they are alone together, Miss Stacy reminds Anne of the values of school behavior. She points out that Anne had wasted her time and had been deceitful in hiding her book in a Canadian history reader. Anne is penitent and offers a much harsher punishment than Miss Stacy would require,

i.e. not reading the book for a whole week—not even to see how the chariot race turns out (187). The incident only serves to strengthen the relationship between Anne and her teacher. Anne's breech of proper conduct was not dramatic, further showing Miss Stacy's understanding of Anne as someone who is passionate, stubborn, and easily pushed into strong emotional reaction. By keeping the situation calm and allowing Anne to save face, she builds the communication and relationship, rather than humiliating and alienating her student.

5.4 Behavior, Expectations, and Roles in School

School is largely meant to teach students correct social behavior. Teachers and students each have a role, and both soon become accustomed to them. Even when students are not familiar with the main behaviors associated with school, they are soon familiar with the general tenor of good student and teacher behavior. The old joke about students' shock at seeing a teacher outside of the classroom points up the tendency for students to see teachers, not as human beings with identities outside of school, but only as part of the school context.

Even though many of the *Junie B.* books focus on value conflicts and ignorance of behavioral norms at school, Junie B. learns early on to expect "teacher" behavior from the teacher and is surprised and disoriented when the teacher manifests "outside of school" behavior. In *Junie B. Jones and the Mushy Gushy Valentine*, Mrs. is explaining the ritual of Valentine cards to the class. She informs the children of how many students are in the class, and then connects that number with how many valentines each child should bring. Junie B. asks for specifics of how the Valentine ritual works:

> I tapped on my chin.
>
> "Yeah, only what if there's people in here who we don't actually like that much? Do we have to bring them a valentime [sic], too?" (17-18)

Mrs. assures Junie B. and the rest of the class that the rules of the ritual are inclusive, that every child brings a valentine for every other child. Then she sits back down at her desk. Junie B.

> zoomed up there and whispered in her ear. "Yeah, only I know I have to bring cards to the *regular* boys and girls[...] But I don't have to bring cards to the big, fat stinky heads, do I?"

> All of a sudden, Mrs. throwed her arms in the air.
>
> "Yes, Junie B.! Yes, you do![...] For the last time...you will bring a card for *everyone* in Room Nine. Even the big, fat stinky heads!"
>
> Just then, all of Room Nine looked at her.
>
> 'Cause teachers are not supposed to say *big, fat stinky heads*, I think. (18-19)

The students of Room Nine have learned to expect appropriate teacher behavior from Mrs., and they are taken off balance when she does not comply. Mrs. acts like a real person and uses "kid" language (i.e. big, fat stinky heads) instead of calmly reinforcing the standard to Junie B. Mrs. is supposed to be a knowledgeable, reasonable, adult with no actual name (merely the title Mrs.) that is always in control of the classroom. She is not supposed to be a normal out-of-school-human who becomes frustrated and possibly even raises her voice.

Some teachers like Mr. Phillips from *Anne of Green Gables* and Mr. Krupp from *Captain Underpants* abuse their authority role for personal gain. They let their out-of-school interests motivate their behavior as teachers and administrators, manipulating the students

for the adult's benefit. In the case of Mr. Phillips it is merely that he does not teach and enforce behavior consistently and in a manner that respects students. He wants the salary without the bother of completing his role as a teacher. Mr. Krupp, as we see more fully in Chapter Four, goes even further and attempts to blackmail his students.

While these actively negative authority figures do exist in children's literature, other works illustrate how teachers allow their role in the classroom to define not only their behavior, but also the relationship between teacher and student. Teachers are socialized to know what teacher-student interactions should look like, and they project their expectations on their interactions with their students.

When teachers allow roles to define relationships instead of allowing for individual relationships to be constructed between themselves and each child, these books argue that the student is left without an opening in the structure of the school culture for expressions that do not fit within the boundaries of school happenings—including issues involving relationships between the teacher and the student. We saw how in Anne's case, Mr. Phillips is completely oblivious to the significance of the humiliation he uses as

a punishment. Even when a teacher means well, though, fixed definitions of relationships leave out space for individual interactions that can cause significant, though unintentional, frustration for students.

5.5 Communicating Behind Masks

Ramona Quimby is the heroine of a series of books written by Beverly Cleary. The books follow Ramona through her school years, where Ramona has problems similar to Anne's in that Ramona has difficulty with adult expectations and communication. In her early grades at school, Ramona takes a while to understand the social expectations of her behavior. And naturally, her ignorance creates problems for her. Many of the of the incidents in Cleary's books, *Ramona the Brave,* and *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* center around misunderstandings Ramona has with her teacher and how those miscommunications color Ramona's perception of herself and her ability to perform in school.

In September of her first-grade year, Ramona's class is making owls out of paper bags and construction paper. These art pieces are significant to Ramona partly because they are meant to decorate the

students' desks for parents' night and partly because being allowed to work on a creative art project is a welcome change for Ramona.

Ramona's desk sits next to Susan's. Susan and Ramona conflicted socially in kindergarten because Susan's long ringlets provided an irresistible temptation for Ramona, who loved to pull them and say "Boing!" even when she knew she was not supposed to. Ramona struggled over controlling her behavior and making it match with the social norm all during kindergarten. During the owl project, Ramona remembers kindergarten, is tempted to pull the curl again, but refrains. She reminds herself that she "is not a baby" this year.

In addition to not being a baby, Ramona follows the directions correctly and is careful not to waste paste as she makes her owl. Mrs. Griggs puts a high value on not wasting past, and often points out those students who do or do not meet with her approval in this regard. Ramona reflects proudly that she is not a paste-waster. Even though Mrs. Griggs did not see her work yet, Ramona anticipates the praise that she feels she has earned.

This triumph in acquiring responsible social behavior for the first grade on several levels is significant because Ramona's success

goes unnoticed and unrewarded but her subsequent frustration over miscommunication *is* noticed.

Cleary establishes Ramona as a creative girl. Ramona wants to make her owl unique. The owls all follow the same pattern of a brown bag with construction paper circles and triangles for eyes and beak. Ramona follows the instructions correctly but expresses her individuality when she draws little v's to make it look like her owl has feathers. She also draws glasses and makes her owl looking off to the side so that he looks like a "wise, old owl."

At this pinnacle of accomplishment, Ramona looks over and realizes that Susan has copied her owl. Just then, Mrs. Griggs walks past and notices Susan's owl first, praising the exact elements that Susan has copied from Ramona. Ramona covers her owl because in the classroom, copying is frowned upon, and since Mrs. Griggs saw Susan's owl first, Ramona is convinced that she will receive the blame for not keeping her eyes on her own work. Ultimately, in rage and humiliation Ramona scrunches her own owl rather be accused of copying.

Mrs. Griggs, while in many respects a benevolent teacher, misses the important information about the reasons behind Ramona's behavior. She sees Ramona as not being willing to

participate. While Mrs. Griggs does not make an issue out of the missing owl and allows Ramona to remain owl-less, she does not cross into the realm of interpersonal relationship to communicate effectively with Ramona.

Ramona is even more confused about her relationship with her teacher the next year when Mrs. Whaley is her teacher during the hard-boiled egg fad. Students who bring lunches begin bringing similar items. Ramona was not included when the fad was to bring small bags of chips to school because her mother did not approve of junk food. However, now the fad is hard-boiled eggs, and Ramona has one in her lunch. The preferred way of cracking a hard-boiled egg is on the head. Some give timid taps, and others whack. Of course, Ramona is a whacker, and of course it turns out that her egg is raw.

A little while later, a Ramona with stiff, eggy hair sits on the cot in the office, not wanting to go back to class. Mrs. Whaley comes in and mentioned Ramona to the secretary. When Mrs. Whaley says, "I hear my little show-off came in with egg in her hair[...] What a nuisance," she means getting egg in one's hair is a nuisance, but Ramona interprets what she hears to mean that *she* is the nuisance (68). Ramona worries about this opinion for weeks because she

wants to be accepted by her teacher and because she feels that the decree is unfair. She doesn't believe that she is a nuisance.

But Ramona finds no opportunity to talk to Mrs. Whaley until book reports are assigned. Ramona does not feel comfortable in her knowledge of how to fulfill the assignment. After consulting with her father, she calls her friends and arranges to give her report on *The Left Behind Cat* in the same format as her favorite cat food commercial. Ramona, who loves to make things out of paper, tape, and staples, creates cat masks for herself and the other girls to wear.

Ramona's report goes well until the very end where Ramona can't remember what she was supposed to say. She finishes with an adapted tag line from an Alka Seltzer commercial, "I can't believe I read the *whole* thing!" (158). After the report the children leave for lunch. Ramona, however stays. She "felt brave behind her cat mask" (158). From the safety of her mask, Ramona dares to approach Mrs. Whaley. "That wasn't the way my report was supposed to end."

"Did you like the book?" asked Mrs. Whaley.

"Not really," confessed Ramona.

"Then I think it was a good way to end your report," said the teacher. "Asking the class to sell books they really don't like isn't fair, now that I stop to think about it. I was only trying to make book reports a little livelier."

Encouraged by this confession and still safe behind her mask, Ramona had the boldness to speak up. "Mrs. Whaley," she said with her heart pounding, "you told Mrs. Larson that I'm a nuisance, and I don't think I am."

Mrs. Whaley looked astonished. "When did I say that?"

"The day I got egg in my hair," said Ramona. "You called me a show-off and said I was a nuisance."

Mrs. Whaley frowned, thinking. "Why, Ramona, I can recall saying something about my little show-off, but I meant it affectionately, and I'm sure I never called you a nuisance."

"Yes you did," insisted Ramona. "You said I was a show-off, and then you said, 'What a nuisance.'" Ramona could never forget those exact words.

Mrs. Whaley, who had looked worried, smiled in relief. "Oh Ramona, you misunderstood," she said. "I meant that trying to wash egg out of your hair was a nuisance for Mrs. Larson. I didn't mean that you personally were a nuisance."

Ramona felt a little better, enough to come out from under her mask to say, "I wasn't showing off. I was just trying to crack an egg on my head like everyone else."

Mrs. Whaley's smile was mischievous. "Tell me, Ramona," she said, "don't you ever try to show off?"

Ramona was embarrassed, "Well...maybe ...sometimes, a little," she admitted. Then she added positively, "But I wasn't showing off that day. How could I be showing off when I was doing what everyone else was doing?"

"You've convinced me," said Mrs. Whaley with a big smile. (158-61)

Cleary manages to paint a lucid portrait of communication within a few pages of dialogue. At first, Ramona only dares talk to her teacher because she is alone and because the mask allows her a way to speak out of her role as a student. The combination of the time and the mask create a small space apart from the normal routine of school where she attempts to discuss her relationship with her teacher. It is the kind of conversation that does not fit in until after the bell rings.

While school gives a major allotment of time for academic analysis, it gives little space for relationship analysis. Ramona and Mrs. Whaley take the time apart from school time to discuss their relationship rather than just act on assumptions. In addition to reinforcing their positive relationship, Ramona and Mrs. Whaley learn other things about themselves and their interpersonal workings that they would not have learned had they not experienced person-to-person communication rather than teacher-to-student interaction.

Ramona learned about self reflection. Mrs. Whaley's humor and "mischief" allowed her to point out elements of Ramona's personality and behavior that Ramona had not looked at closely before. Ramona could see and admit that she did sometimes show

off. Mrs. Whaley had honest feedback about her teaching. While entirely good-intentioned, the assignment to sell the book as an alternative form of book report had frustrated Ramona because she did not know how to sell a book that she did not enjoy reading. Mrs. Whaley had an opportunity to not only use best practices, but to reflect on how her assignments connected with her students as individuals. It is noteworthy that she said, "now that I stop to think about it." A teacher is a very busy person, and while she may be skillful and well-meaning, occasional periods of reflection and meditation (as well as honest feedback) are necessary to make teaching effective to the individuals who fill student desks and roles.

The problem was that Ramona had to find an unusual opportunity to communicate with her teacher about something that is not included in the prescribed teacher-student interactions. Mrs. Whaley and Mrs. Griggs placed themselves in the teacher's role and missed signals from Ramona about problems that needed to be addressed. Owl scrunching, hiding in the office, and other more subtle cues such as reluctance could have told the teacher to find a time to talk with Ramona about her feelings. Both teachers were clearly well-meaning, but they did not make an opportunity to go outside of the vocabulary and topics that are a part of the school

culture. Without moderation, roles in school prohibit communication between members of the school community in a more intricate identity. The school face of a student or teacher is not his or her only face. Cleary's books imply that too-dominant roles can prohibit teachers understanding their students as complex individuals with shape beyond their behavior manifestation within the role of student at school.

CHAPTER 6

LITERARY ANALYSIS: I SOLEMNLY SWEAR THAT I AM UP TO NO GOOD

6.1 Not Fitting in with the System

In school, as with any institution, there is a power structure. The institution has certain values, and those values are disseminated to the teachers and students. A school has social expectations for behavior, and it perpetuates an ideology about what is good and bad. As Jonathan Gayles put it, "success and failure are socially constructed," (251) which means that a student's personal development might direct what effort and time are invested in pursuits that are not valued by the school. There are some times where developing as a person requires failure as defined by the institution of the school. The problem with school is that it keeps records, which rigidly label the students, and doesn't allow for a value system that conflict with its own.

At some point, a student's out-of-school life will conflict with the in-school life. It might be something simple like lack of sleep which makes punctuality difficult, or it might be something momentous such as exploration of identity or family crisis that creates long-term disruption of a student's ability to fulfill the social

expectations of the school. When students feel that they are unable to succeed as defined by school, one coping strategy is to find some way of reversing the power structure and to create new values which allow students to define success in more accessible ways. In children's literature, I find that it is often the case that students deal with this imbalance of power in much the same way that minority groups do. Because the balance of power is in the institution's hands, a direct confrontation is ineffective. Students use varying levels of subversion in an attempt to feel that their values are being honored. For minority students, the disparity of values and the consequent subversion is more extreme, but it works similarly.

One example is Elizabeth Meador's research on minority cultures in high school where success is ethnically biased. She records one student's explanation of the situation:

> A good student is a basketball player or a football player who has good grades and who has friends. Many of these students don't have anything to do with Hispanics. In our school Anglo students are very picky and they don't allow everybody into their little groups, or their little cliques. And many of those cliques are the ones that are considered to be, you know, kind of the

> best students. Because they all play basketball together on school teams, and Latino students don't want to participate in things like that. (153)

Besides looking at the basic fact that Hispanics are not considered to be the "good students," what is the cultural construct that defines the majority as acceptable and the minority as unacceptable? There are two cultural influences working together as a double barrier against the Hispanics. First, ethnically the minority population is different. They are assumed to represent a social class that differs in behavior and values from the majority. For the dominant culture, difference is bad because the goal of the culture is to perpetuate its dominance. Second, a minority population is also at odds with the school as institution. The primary goal of the institution is to preserve itself. A large part of those goals includes smoothly functioning schedules and procedures, and appropriate performance on standardized measuring instruments (usually state and national testing). The implication is that at some point in the past, "normality" was defined by whatever mixture of ethnicities happened to be in place at the time. Once established, any difference or change threatens the status quo must be either be removed or forced to adapt in order for

both the culture and institution to preserve the accepted equilibrium.

Another important problem for any minority student population is that in theory, learning would equate with acceptable performance, which would fulfill one of the values of the school culture. However in the real world, intelligence and ability does not always equate with a schools ways of assessing performance. Language and cultural adjustments might affect test performance as well as the procedural functioning of the school (Gollnick and Chinn 109-111). Exactly how elements like creativity, imagination, and individuality might also interfere with the institution will be considered later.

For the moment, simply from the view of ethnicity, it doesn't matter how Hispanics (or any other minority) are defined except that they are not from the dominant culture. They are therefore punished for not complying with the cultural standards. This is not to say that schools intend to punish minority students, but because of the implicitly paternalistic goals of trying to "assimilate" students and helping them "adapt," teachers and administrators assume the role of the powerful require that minority students change their behaviors, values, and cultural identity in order to fit in better. And

where Captain Underpants books are concerned, culture and institutions seek to preserve themselves, consequently the dominant group operates to minimize any other cultural influence that threatens it.

6.2 Enter the Waistband Warrior

Dav Pilkey's controversial classic, *The Adventures of Captain Underpants* speaks directly to the imbalance of power inherent in the culture of school. This series of books is reluctantly accepted as allowable reading material by adults simply because of the widespread audience it reaches. The *Captain Underpants* books are ones that connect with a traditionally non-reading population. In his article, "'Captain Underpants is My Hero': Things Have Changed, or Have They?" Roderick McGillis defines the audience for *Captain Underpants* books as boys in the 9-year old range who do not read voluntarily. He quotes one fan, James Innocent from Massachusetts as saying, "At school, when they say I have to read, I feel like they're punishing me" (64). Quotes like this one are why adults let *Captain Underpants* books into their libraries and homes. As Amy Daniels, "a long-time children's librarian in Columbia, South Carolina" puts the influence of Captain Underpants, "Rarely do we encounter books

that will make children beg for more" (qtd. in McGillis 63). McGillis goes on to quote Mary Jo Dickerson, a mom, who says "'I say any book that encourages my son to read is worth its weight in gold'" (63). Thus even though adults prefer other reading material, they settle for stories about evil toilets taking over the school just because their kids want to read them.

Perhaps the heroes of Pilkey's novels are sympathetic because they don't fit in with the goals of the school system either. As mischief-makers, Harold Hutchins and George Beard are equally in the minority, even though Harold is Caucasian and George is African American because in the story, they share the same values, and they happen to be directly opposed to the cultural and institutional values of Jerome Horowitz Elementary School.

Pilkey, as the narrator, sets up the conflict of values right at the beginning, including establishing which value system he sides with. "No matter what everybody else thought, they were good, sweet, and loveable.... Well, OK, maybe they weren't so sweet and loveable, but they were good nonetheless" (2). Right at the beginning of the story we have the value systems clearly outlined. "Everybody else" (a.k.a. society, school) values sweet and loveable. Pilkey values the fact that the boys are "good," even though he

communicates openly that his definition of good will differ from the larger society, especially the society which lends authority to the school.

To say that George and Harold weren't model students would be putting it mildly. First of all, they don't get along with the administration. The narrator informs us without any equivocation that the principle hates George and Harold. An illustration shows him smoldering at his desk as he vows that he's "going to get those boys one day...One day very, very soon!" (20).

The principal, Mr. Krupp, personifies the pervading attitudes attributed to Jerome Horowitz Elementary School and to school in general. Krupp hates the boys because they are silly, they laugh, they pull pranks, and mostly because they create *Captain Underpants* comic books. In other words, they are naturally happy, creative children who like to write and draw adventure stories (as opposed to reports for school). And the primary crime in the culture of school, according to Pilkey, is to be happy and to enjoy what you are doing. School represents everything bland, boring, and selfish. Everything exciting, fun, and creative is forbidden there. McGillis points out that:

> These two kids are just bored at having to sit still seven hours a day at school. [...] The narrator directs his reassurances both to young readers who will wish to identify with the misbehavior of the two protagonists and to adults who need reminding that creating mischief comes naturally to young boys, especially to young boys who must cope with the stultifying boredom of school. (65)

It is ironic that many of George and Harold's interests require skills that are taught at school. They write, illustrate, publish, and then market creative works. They practice creative reasoning and wordplay when they rearrange words and letters on signs to create new phrases. They push their creative problem-solving abilities to their limits whenever they have to get out of detention or save the world.

These skills, however, are what precisely what get them in trouble. They fit the academic goals of the institution, but they conflict with the behavioral norms of the school as a culture. Wordplay is acceptable as a class activity when spelling is taught, but to take an informative marquee that reads "See Our Big Football Game Today," and alter it to read "Boy Our Feet Smell Bad" is

socially unacceptable. This characteristic is in keeping with Angela Valenzuela's research. As she argues in *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring:*

> Before dismissing urban, U.S.-born youth as lazy underachievers, it behooves researchers and practitioners to first examine the school's role in fostering poor academic performance. Bringing schools into sharper focus, as my study does, reveals that U.S.-born youth are neither inherently antischool nor oppositional. They oppose a schooling process that disrespects them; they oppose not education, but *schooling.* (5)

Of course, social imperatives overriding goals for learning links school to the morality and propriety of the larger society as well as the society of the school environment. In *Captain Underpants,* the participation in good-natured but socially questionable behavior is viewed so negatively by the school system that no mastery of skills and concepts can overcome it. In *Captain Underpants and the Perilous Plot of Professor Poopypants,* when Harold and George change a sign from "Don't Underestimate Our Good Teachers" (Pilkey 13) to "Our Teachers Don't Use Deoderant"

(16), there are no teachers in the book who sigh and say that at least most of the words are spelled correctly. The teachers are out to enforce conformity, and they hate everything not deemed acceptable.

For example, in *Captain Underpants and the Wrath of the Wicked Wedgie Woman* Harold and George's teacher, Ms. Ribble is not as concerned with "'the three Rs' (Reading, 'Riting, and 'Rithmetic)...Ms. Ribble is more concerned with enforcing what she calls 'the three Ss' (Sit down, Shut your pie holes, and Stop DRIVING ME CRAZY!) (Pilkey, 12).

Pilkey continues in his assessment of how this attitude affects the students, especially students who don't fit in, like Harold and George:

> While this [Ms. Ribble's three Ss] was unfortunate for all of her students, it was especially bad for George and Harold, because they were very imaginative boys.
>
> You see, imagination was not really encouraged at George and Harold's school—in fact, it was discouraged. 'Imagination' would only get you a one-way ticket to the principal's office.
>
> This was sad for George and Harold, because they didn't get straight As, they weren't sports stars, and

> they could barely walk down the hallway without getting into trouble. (*Wicked Wedgie* 12-13).

At this point, Pilkey's illustration shows George and Harold changing a sign in the school. The original sign read, "People—Please wear your socks on the gym floor" (*Wicked Wedgie* 11) which was duly changed to "Please go pee-pee in your socks for warmth" (*Wicked Wedgie* 14).

Tasteless, yes, but probably not significantly questionable ethically to justify a hostile environment. Pilkey focuses on the fertility of George and Harold's imagination, speculating that one day they would use that imagination to save the human race. If Pilkey acts like an adult at all in his role as narrator, it is to be so confident in his valuation of imagination and pranks against the equally strong value system of the administration that sets itself against the protagonists.

While Ms. Ribble isn't a good teacher for any student, the student body as a whole is more closely aligned culturally with each other and with the values of the school than with George and Harold's. Pilkey carefully differentiates between Harold and George and the other students. They, as minority students, are the ones who are imaginative, creative, and have a penchant for pranks, but

the effect recalls Meador's example of Hispanic students who did not value grade achievement and participation in sports in the same way that the dominant school culture did.

Minority groups feel estranged from the main population. They can feel either unacceptable by the main body, or that in order to conform, they would have to deny/change their identity beyond acceptable limits (Valenzuela, Rivera). According to McGillis, "George and Harold are not one dimensional—not really—they just appear so to the Mr. Krupps of this world" (66). When a student becomes so far removed from the values of the school system, then they have to find another context to operate in. Whether excluded students participate in rebellion (acts which show defiance toward the established authority) or subversion (acts which seek to change the established authority or values), they define themselves in opposition to the majority's social system, which creates difficulties for effective learning to take place.

Or does it? The common element in all the *Captain Underpants* books is that George and Harold are willing to place their needs and values above those of the school system, and in the end, the books, skills and projects they insist on focusing on at the expense of school do prove to be valuable. What they learn

independently turns out to be worth the fight against the establishment. This unanimity of success is most likely based on the dramatic needs of the story. Strong protagonists make for good stories, and they also facilitate happy endings that are more popular in the 8-12 year-old range.

6.3 Subversion as Education

One case where learning proves to be valuable is in the book *Frindle,* by Andrew Clements, an author who takes on many issues about authority and school. In this particular book, Nick only intends to waste time in class by asking a question about the dictionary, but it turns into a project that shapes his entire life. When forced to do a project about words, he starts thinking about the relationship between signifier and signified (in his own grade school way) and decides that the connection is arbitrary and can be changed. He begins calling the tool he writes with a "frindle." His social experiment catches on! Soon his entire class writes with either pencils or frindles, but never with pens. Other classes begin to adopt the fun, new word. The fad would have probably died a natural death had it not been for the opposition from his teacher,

Mrs. Granger. She argues that the word isn't real because it isn't in the dictionary, and that they aren't to use it.

Nick is visited by the principal and is punished with an after-school sentence-writing regime in order to prove the teacher's point. In the end, "frindle" becomes widely used, merchandised, and finally enters the dictionary. Nick learns a lot of lessons from the episode, but as is typical with experience-based, contextualized learning, his conclusions aren't confined to a single category. Rather Nick's subversion teaches him about words and how new words are incorporated into a language. He learns about politics and social systems. He learns about leadership, and ultimately he develops a lasting respect for and relationship with his teacher. Because Nick tries to change the system, he grows as a person, and learns more lasting lessons than he would have had he not constructed his own learning through trying to understand and subvert the system in a small way.

Since Nick's school is not antagonistic like the world of *Captain Underpants*; he has no desire to alter the entire system. He just wants to be able to individualize his working vocabulary and encourage others to do the same. The problem is that his teacher is insistent that the students use words from the dictionary—the

standard. There are no ethical issues with Nick's behavior, only a battle to see if he should conform to the established method or not. Nick carves out his own small space in the system and by doing so gains deeper insights into learning than he would have otherwise.

6.4 Fred and George

Another set of boys whose non-standard values wreak varying levels of havoc around the edges of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. are Fred and George Weasely. They learn the skills that outfit them for a successful adult life from their constant subversion of school, rather than from the information presented by teachers in the classroom.

The Weasley twins encounter pressure not only to conform, but to achieve, from their parents as well as from school. In the world of wizards, children go to school in a similar structure to English boarding schools. In their fifth year (age 15), students finish with O.W.L (Ordinary Wizard Level) exams. In the seventh year (age 17), students take the N.E.W.T (Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests) exams. Based on which subjects they pass in these exams, students are qualified for different careers. Positions which are higher politically and financially require higher levels of competency.

Fred and George's three older brothers all perform admirably in these tests and find good careers that position them as solid citizens of the community. The twins, however, have other ideas. Their goal is to own a joke shop, and they work very hard to accomplish that goal. Unfortunately for relations with their teachers (not to mention their mother), opening a joke shop doesn't mean doing well in normal classes such as potions, transfiguration, or charms.

That isn't to say that Fred and George are poor wizards. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix,* they work all summer at magic, and since what they want to know isn't covered in class, they have to experiment and invent things. For example, the Skiving Snackboxes they invent aren't exactly standard curriculum. The variety known as Puking Pastilles are designed to get you out of class by helping your perform a convincing imitation of the stomach flu:

> First, Fred would take a bite out of the orange end of a chew, at which he would vomit spectacularly into a bucket they had placed in front of them. Then he would force down the purple end of the chew, at which the vomiting would immediately cease. Lee Jordan, who

> was assisting the demonstration, was lazily vanishing the vomit at regular intervals. (*Phoenix* 368)

While this demonstration of the twins' specialization in magic is going on, Harry Potter and his two best friends, Ron Weasely (the twins' brother) and Hermione Granger (the smartest witch at Hogwarts) discuss the value of Fred and George's magical abilities:

> 'You know, I don't get why Fred and George only got three O.W.L.s each,' said Harry, watching as Fred, George, and Lee collected gold from the eager crowd. 'They really know their stuff....'
>
> 'Oh, they only know flashy stuff that's no real use to anyone,' said Hermione disparagingly.
>
> 'No real use?' said Ron in a strained voice. 'Hermione, they've got about twenty-six Galleons [wizard money] already....'" (*Phoenix* 368-69)

Even though Hermione doesn't approve of the twins' line of study, she is forced to acknowledge that she is impressed with some of the work they turn out. When Fred and George demonstrate a product called Headless Hats (which make you head as well as the hat disappear when you put them on), Hermione is intrigued in spite of herself, as she is confronted by something she doesn't know how

to do (*Phoenix* 540). Just like George Beard and Harold Hutchins, the Weasely twins are not lazy or bad, but they are not interested in the typical line of school academics, a characteristic that coincides with research done about minorities in school (Valenzuela 5). Fred and George as well as George and Harold exhibit the same adaptive behavior as minority students. School values are so different from the student's values, that the students use subversive tactics and sometimes create a counter culture in order to reassert their values. They are not powerful enough to directly challenge the establishment, and therefore must resort to methods more in line with their power level, developmental stage, and values.

Research like the Skiving Snackboxes doesn't result in academic success, but it does provide Fred and George with a profitable income. Without even taking their N.E.W.T exams, Fred and George leave school and set up their own wizard joke shop, where they enjoy huge success. Suddenly boys who are no older than eighteen are running their own business and supporting themselves well. While Rowling skims over the financial details that Fred and George would have to navigate at such a young age in spite of having marketable products, she makes it clear that Fred and

George were right to believe in their alternative life path that took them away from school values.

6.5 Umbrage: When Push Comes To Shove

While Dumbledore was the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Fred and George kept their own agenda within certain self-imposed bounds out of respect for Dumbledore and the school. They discuss their views on school rules with Hermione when Professor Umbridge temporarily became the headmistress and made everyone's lives miserable:

> 'We've decided that we don't care about getting into trouble anymore."
>
> Have you ever?' asked Hermione.
>
> "Course we have," said George. "Never been expelled, have we?"
>
> 'We've always known where to draw the line," said Fred.
>
> 'We might have put a toe across it occasionally,' said George.
>
> 'But we've always stopped short of causing real mayhem," said Fred. (Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince* 627)

When Fred and George make this speech, they are informing their friends where to be so that they are not blamed for the impending mayhem. Professor Umbridge creates a school environment that is intolerable for the students, especially for Fred and George. Umbridge is a powerful figure, politically. She is given full government backing and has the authority to rearrange the rules at will. Since Umbridge insists on compliance, she frequently creates new rules with which to force the students into behaving as she wishes.

For example, Umbridge does not want students to learn practical defense magic, which might make them a threat to the government, called the Ministry of Magic. The Minister of Magic and Dumbledore are at odds about how a threat to the wizard community should be dealt with, and the Minister fears that Dumbledore will openly oppose his authority. Hence, Professor Umbridge takes over the practical defense class and has students read a book on government-approved theory, which has no practical application.

The students are outraged and decide to take learning into their own hands. They organize a club to practice magic in secret. Fred and George are among the students with Harry Potter (who has

had much practical experience through the last four books) as the teacher.

When Umbridge gets wind of this club, she immediately issues a decree disbanding all clubs, organizations, and even groups of three or more students meeting together. All clubs must present a petition to her in order to be reorganized. Not only does Umbridge hope to quell the defensive magic group, but she also takes extra time and red-tape to reorganize the sports team that Fred and George are members of simply because she does not like the members of the team.

As students find ways around her rules, Umbridge creates more rules that are increasingly specific and harsh. Eventually, the Weasely twins decide to retaliate. Politically, they have no power, and so they fight back the only way open to them, through subversion. Fred and George prove their prowess as pranksters by such school-stopping events as filling the castle with fireworks that take at least a day to go out and which multiply when you try to put them out magically; or the prank of filling the third-floor corridor with a swamp.

Umbridge proves to be less skillful and crafty than the twins on her own. Even though she attempts to enlist the support of the

faculty, in this particular case, the teachers are sympathetic with the guerilla campaign rather than with the establishment, and they call her to take care of every incident, claiming that they doubt whether they had the authority to deal with it.

The twins drive Umbridge to distraction, and when she attempts to expel them, they make a triumphant getaway on broomsticks through an open window. Yet again, they prove that their practical education was the most useful because they do indeed open a successful joke shop and evade Umbridge entirely.

Even though Fred and George were capable of disrupting school at any time, they followed their own sense of morality about what was acceptable and what was not. As long as they respected the authority of the school, they did nothing that would seriously upset the system. When the system became an openly hostile environment, it became ethical to exert subversive methods to reestablish the balance of power.

Fred and George live in an environment that changed from supportive to hostile, while Dav Pilkey's heroes, George and Harold are stuck in a completely antagonistic school where they have to fight for every bit of space that they have.

In *Captain Underpants*, there is an interesting juxtaposition of moralities at play. George and Harold ruin a big football game by putting pepper in the cheerleader's pompoms, soap bubbles in the band's instruments, itching cream in the team's deep-heating-rub containers, and helium in the football.

Elliot Turiel provides research on subversion where he gives insight onto socially unacceptable behavior. He interviews young children and presents two scenarios. The first is a child taking off clothing on a hot day. The second is a child hitting another child to get a turn on the swing. His findings are that children find the socially unacceptable behavior of going naked ethically viable. For young children, it isn't wrong to take your clothes off if you're hot. However, it is wrong to hit someone just to get a turn on a swing. While both behaviors are at odds with the social setting, one is ethical and one is not (118).

Just as with Turiel's question about children taking off their clothes on a hot day, playing pranks on the whole "football culture" of the school is socially unacceptable. Like running around naked, crashing the big game is not socially acceptable. With Turiel's example, the rule can ethically be bent because it doesn't hurt anyone, and it's a very practical solution to a problem. With George

and Harold, it's probably not exactly nice, but the reader, author, and main characters share the sympathetic awareness that the pranks are funny. Obviously, George and Harold do not participate in the "Big Game" culture that the rest of the students are involved in, so their actions have the distance of two distinct groups that make their actions less charged than if they had performed the same pranks on close friends. The pranks are not socially acceptable, but they are funny. Remember that George and Harold place a high value on humor while they must daily navigate a society that denies all fun and funniness. There is no place for the value of funny that is acceptable, so as long as they aren't hurting anyone, one way to break the rules is as good as another.

On the other hand, Mr. Krupp is a clear villain because his response is without light-hearted humor. His intent is focused malice. He doesn't care about justice, but rather coddles his desire for personal revenge, and places that above his duty as a principal. As a principal, Mr. Krupp should allow Harold and George some protection as human beings and students. He could be strict and tell their parents, or he could be harsh and take the case before the school board—thus getting George and Harold expelled. But instead, out of spite, Mr. Krupp hits below the belt, and threatens to

show the incriminating video tape to the football team, which would "kill [them] every day for the rest of [their] lives" (37).

Mr. Krupp then outlines the long list of rules that George and Harold must obey if they "don't want to be dead as long as [they] live" (37). Mr. Krupp's actions are comparable to Turiel's example of a child who resorts hitting to get a turn on the swing. Getting the desired result (a turn) isn't worth violating the basic elements of human decency and relationship. The situation is beyond social propriety and is a question of morality. Mr. Krupp has crossed the boundary into immoral behavior, and thus the boys must use unusual forms of resistance to change their intolerable environment.

When school, or the representative of school, imposes on child life to an intolerable point, the students subvert the system in their own way. They don't use the school's methods—which would be boring—but they use skills which uphold their values of fun and silly. Thus, the hypno-ring comes into the story, turning Mr. Krupp into Captain Underpants, and the tension goes up and down as the heroes seek to control the influence of their imaginative world on the old school life; but they ultimately do, and the school values are never entirely paramount again. Instead of a boring, serious world, there are streaks of fun, improbable, and "all that is pre-shrunk and

cottony" throughout Jerome-Horowitz Elementary School. By turning the situation into an over-the-top action, comic-book adventure, George and Harold shift the balance of power. They are skillful at using fantastical, ridiculous elements, and the adults in the story are not.

It is also interesting to note that George and Harold never defeat their principal or teacher directly in a school context. Mr. Krupp is converted to a well-meaning but bumbling super hero who helps George and Harold save the world from assorted bathroom joke-based villains. In *Captain Underpants and the Wrath of the Wicked Wedgie-Woman*, even though their teacher turns into Wedgie-Woman, George and Harold defeat the Wedgie-Woman the super villainess and save Ms. Ribble the human. In fact, they use the hypno-ring to make her more fun. From their point of view, they do not exact revenge over the authority figures, but they save them from their miserable, tyrannical selves. Captain Underpants and the new Ms. Ribble are much happier than they were before the hypno-ring came into play, and George and Harold are certainly much happier once their antics have reversed prevailing values and returned balance to the power structure.

6.6 When Smart is Unacceptable

In some schools, the social construct actually reverses values on a large scale. Since the authority figures value good grades and positive behavior, the students who feel disconnected with those authority figures actively seek to define themselves in contrast to school expectations. Jonathan Gayles describes this behavior and the difficulty of achieving academically in such a situation:

> Students who do not achieve (the Lads, the Hallway Hangers, the Burghersiders, involuntary minorities) may be consciously responding to a critical awareness of societal inequality, their positioning within this social hierarchy, and a sense of the futility of trying to change their location within this hierarchy through academic achievement (251).

This social construct, which forbids academic achievement, insists that students be marked according to their academics. Thus, students who want good grades have a hard time justifying them socially. Gayles discusses the importance of students' ability to find a way to look like low-achievers even if they are academically successful, "Decreasing the ability of grades to "mark" students is

very important to students who do not wish to be distinguished from others because of their academic achievement" (255).

Students who feel that attempting to change social levels is futile disengage from school and its goals. "In this sense, disengaging or disidentifying (Steele 1997; Steele and Aronson 1995) from academic achievement could very well be regarded as adaptive, logical, and *resilient*" (Gayles 251). Students who feel like their academic achievement can help them to cross class boundaries must not only continue to work without many examples to encourage them, but they must also negotiate cultural barriers. If the environment contains a cultural gulf between the school culture and the student culture, students who want to maintain their social identity with other students must minimize their academic achievements so that they won't look stuck up or like they are looking down on their low-achieving peers.

Janet McDonald attempts to portray this world in her book *Brother Hood*. While she does not fully enter into the sympathetic, student-perspective, she does try to represent it accurately, showing both sides of the situation with pros and cons and then allowing the protagonist to find a balance of the two worlds rather than choose sides. The story is about Nate Whitely, whose home culture is in

Harlem, New York. However, Nate has been accepted to a college-prep boarding school on a scholarship, and he is quite successful in his new school. His old friends are mostly supportive of Nate and his chances, even though they become suspicious of his loyalties when they suggest some illegal moneymaking projects and Nate hesitates about joining in. Nate wants to prove that he is not like some of the rich, educated and snobbish people he has met at school. He wants to prove to his old friends that he is still one of them, even though he does not want to jeopardize his education.

Gayles quotes an interview with a student who faces a similar situation where the opportunities that education allows are acknowledged:

> This system that we have set up, if you don't have the education then the money's not there and you can't get it. You may be able to do the job but people won't give it to you because you don't have the credentials for it. *So I know I have to get those* (emphasis added). (256)

Grades were more aptly described as something that these youths felt they *needed* as opposed to something that they *wanted.* Their performance in school did not reflect abstract enjoyment of the

learning process. Each of the youths dismissed the "intrinsic value" of a good grade.

> For these youths, academic achievement was something that they *did* without circumscribing their sense of who they *were*. This helped them avoid the dynamics of "fictive kinship" (Fordham 1996; Fordham and Ogbu 1986) that complicate academic achievement for African Americans by providing a "prestige system" that does not include academic achievement (Fordham 1996:71–72)." (Gayles, 2005: 259)

McDonald describes how Nate must work through this contrast. Ultimately, he does learn how to balance his worlds. He retains the culture of his past and is able to be proud of his parents and friends even though they are not highly educated or wealthy. On the other hand, he also finds a comfortable place in his school and with a new girlfriend who is academically achieving and who represents upper-middle class values and culture.

Rather than a telling of one story, Nate stands as a representative of the dilemma faced by many minority students and the book ends on an optimistic hope that academic achievement does not have to mean forsaking home culture.

6.7 Bad for Good Reasons

The characters in these books work hard, and often at educational endeavors as long as they are learning *different* things than the ones valued by school. Take the Weasely twins for example, they didn't just play at jokes; they took joking very seriously. They didn't want a traditional job. They wanted to start their own joke shop, and they worked very hard at learning what they needed to in order to create entirely new jokes.

It took a determination and practical knowledge to pursue their goals in spite of the discouragement they got at home. They had to manage the business aspects of a store. They had to plan carefully and make a complicated plan work. Once they were successful, then they were given approval from their mother and the community at large, but not until then.

The characters in *Frindle* worked in a similar way. Nick and his followers were dedicated to making the experiment successful, and they overcame not only discouragement, but also punishment in order to achieve their goals. If they had been assigned a linguistic experiment to change a word, they probably would not have been so determined, but since they had complete ownership of the project, they were willing to see it through in spite of opposition. In his case,

Nick also was eventually successful. First, the sales of frindle merchandise made him wealthy, but the conflict of the book centered around the acceptance of Mrs. Granger of his choice to use his own signifier to represent the signified that everyone else called a pen. Only years later, after the word "frindle" was added to the dictionary, did Mrs. Granger send him the letter letting him know that he had won. He was working against much more difficult requirements than she was, but it was worth it to him to hold out, and he won.

These boys chose to value things that were different from the values of the school. By taking ownership of non-standard values, they chose to define themselves, not to let an outside authority define them. These stories assert that when the school is reasonable about allowing freedom to explore individual interests and create a self-definition that is different from the pattern, then the students are willing to moderate their behavior to at least partially accommodate a school environment. However, the intensity of their rebellion and subversive activities seems to be directly proportional to the attempts of the school to completely dictate behavior and values. This relationship implies a strong need to not only play, but to use that play to create an intrinsic identity rather than accept

definition solely from an outside authority. In the books, wise teachers do not leave students entirely to their own devices, they give them guidance and instruction, and yet they also respect the decision-making abilities and individuality of their students. They help their students to discover who they are, rather than tell them.

In Captain Underpants, George and Harold are pitted against the adult school world. There are no sympathetic authority figures who are willing to understand the boys' values in school. Interestingly, parents play almost no part in these books. One small but illuminating piece of information about George and Harold's parents is that they allow the boys to sleep out in their tree house. Even though the boys stay up late watching TV, reading comic books, and eating junk food, the parents allow their children time to have fun. Whether the parents are apathetic or sympathetic remains undisclosed, but George and Harold do not play pranks on their parents or in the home. The fact that parents are not allied with the school indicates that not all authority figures are bad. George and Harold are not rebelling against adults and authority in general, but specifically to the tyranny of their particular school. In turn, this specificity implies that a teacher who was willing to allow some fun and work with the boys as individuals, might be able to

work with them and be influential in their lives instead of being depicted as a villain. The fact that Captain Underpants is an evil principle that is changed to participate in their activities could be read as a desire for an adult figure that can enter in to their fun.

The characters in these stories are not against learning and work. They are just against being told what kind of learning and work to do. These stories implicitly argue that understanding the values of students who feel that they are in some way, whether for ethnic or other reasons, defined in contrast to the majority, teachers and administrators can better work with students to further their education instead of fighting against them. Sometimes the rules need to be upheld, and at other times education needs to be placed ahead of the system. Only when school is not paramount to education can communication begin.

CHAPTER 7

LITERARY ANALYSIS: GETTING AWAY FROM SCHOOL

7.1 Introduction

School is focused around content and curriculum. The goal of school is to teach students much of the information and many of the skills that they will need to grow up according to society's idea of a normal adult. What children's literature shows us is that there are times when school is a good setting for learning, and there are times when the structure of school is less suited to teach what students need to learn.

There are two basic types of stories. Some stories focus on the *what* of life. Other stories explore the *why*. Academics are an important element that children need to learn as they mature. However, in order to know what to do with those academics, children need to learn emotional maturity, life skills, how different types of healthy relationships work, and other elements of a complete, rounded person. School is an excellent setting for *what* elements; that is what curriculum is. We learn about scientific inventors, we learn about community helpers, we learn what a gerund is. Concepts are the baseline of school.

Children's literature seems to agree with this. In books where school is the setting, school is not directly involved with the main conflict of the story. One example of this is the *Chet Gecko* series by Bruce Hale. These stories are done in the style of Sam Spade if he were a lizard in an elementary school. Chet does most of the work during recess or when a teacher isn't paying attention. Sometimes Chet tries to do things that run contrary to the normal workings of school, which provides conflict, but school is not directly for or against his goal of solving the mystery. It is merely the setting.

When real life classrooms run like they are supposed to, the setting is relatively conflict-free. Even further, the subject matter of a lesson is rarely if ever the actual plot because curriculum does not usually use a plot structure. Sometimes good teachers can create a sense of story, especially in a long-term project, but a class is always limited for excitement by its four walls, 8:35 to 3:30 schedule, and standardized material. While these elements are very useful for organizational purposes and for preventing especially bad teaching, they do limit options for adventure, experience, and learning that is connected with real-world learning—which brings us to stories that get away from school and what those stories provide for children.

7.2 Unsupervised Adventures

Stories where the children normally would be in school but aren't include some common elements. The first of these is that the parents, and often all the adults, are ejected from the story one way or another. Many stories are about orphans (*Harry Potter*, *The Secret Garden*), others use some kind of narrative device to separate the children from adults, either by bringing the children into another world or by bringing elements from another world into this one.

The classic example of adventures in a magical world is from C.S. Lewis' book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.* The story starts with the World War II bombings in London that provide a convenient excuse to send the children away from their parents and into the country where there is a big old house and people who aren't inclined to keep a sharp eye on where the children are.

During a game of hide and seek, one day, Lucy Pevensie walks into a room with nothing in it except a large, old wardrobe. Lewis uses the wardrobe as a transport device, turning it into a magic doorway that Lucy, and later the rest of her siblings go through to enter the world of Narnia. In this other world, there are no human adults. The only one resembling a human adult is the White Witch,

who unrightfully calls herself the Queen of Narnia. The children are taken seriously as threats to her reign and power, thus placing them in the status of adults. Some of the animals are intelligent, talking creatures, but they defer to the four Pevensie children as rightful heirs to the four thrones at Cair Paravel.

Other books use similar wardrobe devices to get the children away from the real world and away from supervising adults. In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice goes first goes down the rabbit hole in the first and walks through a mirror in the second. In a recent and popular series, *The Secrets of Droon* by Tony Abbott, Eric, Julie, and Neal find a basement door that lets in to the magical world of Droon. However the children escape, they find themselves either separated from adults all together, or among adults who are willing to defer to the children. John Stephens describes how the children from *Five Children and It* by Edith Nesbitt get away and what it means:

> The countryside is represented as an escape both from the naughtiness in children consequent upon urban living and from the battery of adults which exists to reprove that naughtiness ('fathers and mothers, aunts, uncles, cousins, tutors, governesses, and nurses');

> indeed, there 'were no rules [stated or implicit] about not going to places and not doing things' (127).

In this quote, Stephens refers directly to his interpretation of *Five Children and It,* but if we take a wider view and see "naughtiness" as a general term for values imposed by adults, then we see that there is a good reason why none of these children seem to have parents around. Parents would only get in the way. Adults would protect, make decisions, predetermine the value system, and act like adults—which would reduce or eliminate the children's ability to participate in the story, especially when part of that story requires going through the wardrobe, symbolizing a departure from the realistic and entering into the symbolic development of the child. Emotionally and mentally, a child does have to make decisions and sort out meaning apart from adults, and books using a wardrobe device allow a point of departure from the physical reality to the internally symbolic.

School is a place for learning curriculum of the mind, but when children need to learn curriculum of the heart, they do it outside of the official school lessons. Fantasy elements are tools that often bring the internal to an external representation. In real life, internal development might be going on during school, around

the lessons and unseen by anyone. However, in stories, the internal is made more dramatically accessible by exciting and perilous adventures that represent the important, but invisible development within.

For example, C.S. Lewis chose to externally represent the development of a boy named Eustace Scrubb. Eustace has a large character arc that begins with him being a bully and distinctly lacking in sympathy and imagination. Once in Narnia, Eustace makes everyone miserable until he gets lost and enters a dragon's cave. The narrator points out that children who have read the "right sort of books" ("Dawn Treader" 71) would have known not to sleep on a dragon's horde while harboring greedy thoughts, but Eustace had a more "modern" education and knew nothing about it. After his nap, Eustace wakes up to find that he has indeed turned into a dragon, a vivid outward expression of his faults.

Eustace has a difficult time communicating with his friends, as he now has only a dragon's voice and becomes very lonely. Eventually Eustace begins to realize what a burden he is to others and gradually learns empathy and helpfulness. His monstrous body, firey breath and wings become quite useful to his comrades, and Eustace finds out what it's like to be helpful instead of crabby.

After he has made a real change in his heart, he has a dream where Aslan, the great Lion, must cut through his dragon skin to find the human boy inside. The symbolism of how Eustace develops from an unsympathetic to a sympathetic character is clear. Lewis did not have to use fantastical elements for such a theme, but it is not uncommon for authors to write and for children to read "the right sort of books," that is, books which make use of the imagination and show the internal through fantastic, dramatic, and therefore fun, symbols.

Bruno Bettleheim is one of the foundational authors in fairy-tale psychology. His book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, analyzes fairy tales in terms of the psychological role they play. According to Bettleheim, Hansel and Gretel is a story about gluttony and children's oral fixation. Cinderella, as with many fairy tales about girls, has a father incapable of helping his daughter because the conflict is about a girl's relationship and competition with her mother. Pushed to an extreme, she plays out the Electra syndrome where the mother (always displaced from a child's real mother by being a step-mother) is directly competing with the daughter for female values such as beauty, goodness, and of course, the handsome prince.

Bettleheim argues that fantasy gives children a symbolic world where they can work out internal conflict and personal development in seemingly concrete ways. His argument is also ours. Children enter worlds that in one way or another depart from the real world so that they can give symbolic shape to their internal development—which brings us to the element, besides adults, which is lacking from many of these adventures: school.

In the Narnia books, school is first disrupted by the war, later it is displaced by a force that sucks the children into Narnia even as their train is whisking them away to boarding school. In every book, there is a good excuse to get children apart from the main mechanism of school, to be off on an adventure.

7.3 Curriculum Outside the Classroom

In Narnia, the children learn through experience, and they learn things that aren't in a school curriculum. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the, Wardrobe,* Edmund's character experiencing the most development. Under the influence of boarding school, Edmund had begun to "go wrong." He isn't very nice anymore, and he is developing habits that Peter worries about (such as lying and picking on his sister) and doesn't seem to have much confidence that adults would help Edmund. In Narnia, however, Edmund is

allowed to take his nastiness to the extreme of betraying his siblings to the White Witch. But then he sees the White Witch turn a party of unsuspecting animals into stone. As he contemplates their fate the narrator points out that this was the first time he had ever felt sorry for anyone other than himself. This is his first turning point, and his new feelings lead him to eventually help defeat the White Witch. Thus, in Narnia, Edmust is both lost and redeemed, and finally becomes a king at Cair Paravel. Such a progression is difficult for a boarding school to manage. Which is why we need Narnia.

In juxtaposition, another popular series of books uses a similar wardrobe device, but the stories are told in a very different way. Mary Pope Osbourn's *Magic Tree House* series follows a similar pattern of allowing Jack and his sister Annie into magical adventures when a mysterious tree house appears in the woods near their home.

The difference with these books is that Jack and Annie do not use their wardrobe device to symbolically enter the internal world. Their characters are static, clearly designed to teach curriculum and perpetuate the book series. Jack is always studious and cautious. Annie is always impetuous and excited, dragging Jack into more

dramatic situations than he would be inclined to get into on his own. The tree house is a doorway into a curriculum unit where Jack and Annie read from a guidebook and solve a puzzle as a learning experience.

For example, book #35, *Night of the New Magicians*, Jack and Annie are transported to the 1889 World's Fair in Paris. They are told by Merlin (their mentor) that an evil sorcerer is planning to capture four new magicians and force them to tell him their secrets. Jack and Annie's mission is to save the Magician of Sound, the Magician of Iron, the Magician of Light, and the Magician of the Invisible.

The two children go through the fair with clues and discover that these magicians are actually scientists whose work would look like magic if someone had previously had no experience with technology. They learn about the telephone (magic of sound), the light bulb (magic of light), pasteurization (magic of the invisible), and finally about the Eiffel Tower itself (magic of iron). Once they climb all the stairs to the top of the tower, they find a group of eminent scientists (Louis Pasteur, Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, and Gustaf Eiffel) in a quiet party and happily disposed to discuss their secrets (such as "genius is 1% inspiration and 99%

perspiration") with the two children. Then the children learn that there is actually no evil sorcerer, but their mentor thought that they would work harder if they had a purpose.

While most of Osbourne's other stories do allow Jack and Annie's adventures to be a little more meaningful than this one, still, the characters don't develop, and the scaffolding of the curriculum often shows through the hands-on packaging.

In spite of all that, the books are still fun. Osbourn uses one of the great strengths of literature, that of vicarious experience. She could have started with publishing her research guides, which probably would have never sold well on their own, but she used the traditional magic to get children away from boring, conventional life, and into adventures where they are important and learn significant skills and information. The frame of Jack and Annie going on adventures and then returning to the tree house gives the stories a comfortable familiarity and provides the trope of "stranger in a strange land" so that explaining what's going on is relevant to the story. The tree house is Osbourn's wardrobe that gives children magical access to another world where they can have new experiences and be taken seriously.

As school curriculum, The *Magic Treehouse* books are a fun way to combine adventure with learning. Children like to read series books, and if they will voluntarily ask for educational material rather than reading some other series that are easy entertainment with no substance, then the books have value. However, they are tools that belong inside a classroom, which is very different in purpose and effect from books like the Narnia series that deliberately leave the classroom because the classroom is not an appropriate learning context for their themes.

7.4 Why Stories? A Sense of Purpose Behind Life

Another contemporary series of books has a hero very deliberately escape from school. In Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* books, the character development of the title character is much more subtle than in Lewis' *Narnia* books, but Artemis' changing character runs significantly through a James Bond-meets-Tinkerbell adventure. Artemis Fowl is a genius, a criminal mastermind, and twelve years old. If anyone over about fourteen is willing to give their suspension of disbelief some exercise, they'll see the fun in this fast-paced chess board where the most powerful piece is the youngest one.

Part of the significance in these books that get away from school is that people who are normally on the bottom rung of the power ladder are given a space where the values are shifted and young people are given status over old ones. In his writings on deconstruction in literary theory, Jacques Derrida talks about how our entire perspective of reality is built on binary value systems: good and bad, light and dark, thin and fat, old and young, powerful and weak. All values exist in binary pairs with one element being privileged over another. For example, good is privileged over bad—it is more greatly valued and seen as more powerful. Along that line of thought, adults and children exist in a power structure where adults are privileged. In many children's books, the author temporarily inverts the power structure, giving children a chance to see themselves as powerful and privileged (Bressler 84).

Artemis Fowl is a clear example of a person who is powerful in spite of being young. Not only that, but he is powerful in an adult world. To achieve this effect, Colfer had to carefully construct the adult world Artemis interacts with. In the first book, Colfer gets rid of Artemis' parents without actually making him an orphan. Artemis' father is missing after his plane crashed on the way to Russia. His mother, Angelina Fowl, is temporarily insane over the

shock of having her husband gone. She stays in her bedroom, won't let any light in, and spends most of her time in a medicated sleep. Once the parents are out of the way, it is simple for Artemis to neglect to enroll himself in boarding school. Colfer makes it clear that since Artemis is already so smart that he publishes scholarly articles under different pseudonyms for fun, sixth grade is probably not so important anyway.

The other human adult Artemis deals with is Butler, a massively powerful body guard who has the muscles, weapon expertise, and cool demeanor to make him a competitor for best in the world. However, he is Artemis' servant who defers to Artemis in everything and follows orders without question.

Artemis' opponents are also adults, but they are outside the typical realm of adulthood because they are fairies, not the tinkle and glitter type of fairies. These fairies are short but not tiny, and while they do have some types of magic (especially healing powers), their technology leaves anything developed by humans way behind.

In his first adventure, Artemis uncovers the carefully hidden existence of fairies and attempts to kidnap one and hold her hostage to get the ransom of fairy gold—a ton of gold bricks, to be exact. Of course nothing goes exactly according to plan, but aside from the

adventure elements of chance and mischance, Artemis finds that the emotional element of kidnapping someone and endangering lives is more than his coolly-cerebral plan had bargained for. As he finds it necessary to commit more and more extreme and in-humane acts in order to achieve his financial goal, Artemis finds it harder and harder to disregard his humanity.

Early on in the fourth book, *Artemis Fowl: The Opal Deception,* Artemis' plot is hampered by his conscience: "Every time he spoke to mother he felt guilty. Angelina Fowl had a way of awakening his conscience. This was a relatively new development. A year ago he may have felt a tiny pinprick of guilt about lying to his mother, but now even the minor trick he was about to play would haunt his thoughts for weeks" (Colfer, *Opal* 95).

In the end, Artemis proves himself to be the most powerful player in the game, thus reinforcing his inverted power values where a child can compete in adult-level games, but Artemis also learns that he is subject to human ethics and that he values relationships more than gold—though gold is still high on his list. Thus, just as in the Narnia series, it is more important for Artemis to learn to interact with people than to master academics.

Chapter 8

Literary Analysis: Teaching—Mission Impossible?

8.1 Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle as a Bush Teacher

Teacher burnout and turnover are significant parts of the costs of public education (Ingersoll, Younger et al.). As Simon Veenman and Frances Rust have reported, new teachers often enter their profession full of a naïve idealism that can be quickly crushed under the weight of real life in the schoolroom.

Veenman posits three levels of teacher development, which also reflect the concerns of children entering a classroom for the first time:

1. Survival: in this phase, new teachers are concerned about "class control, being liked by pupils, and being valuated."
2. Situation: in this phase, new teachers are concerned about "limitations and frustrations in the teaching situation, methods and materials," and how to master certain skills within the teaching/learning situation.
3. Pupil Concern: in this phase teachers become more adept at relating to pupils as individuals, the teachers are concerned

about their students' learning, social and emotional needs. (161)

`Most studies agree that beginning teachers do not begin to enter the second or third level of development until at least their second year (Flores, Lundeen).

As we might imagine, it is the teachers in the third category that students seem to prefer most according to the portrayals of "good teachers" we find in children's literature.

However, the path to becoming a third level teacher is difficult one. The situation of a new teacher in rural Alaskan school can help us see the difficulties of a first-year teacher in stark relief. Alaska's teacher turnover rate is 15 percent compared to the national rate of 13.7 percent, but this rate takes into account Alaska's urban school districts. "Teachers are burning out and leaving at an extremely high rate (50 percent – 100 percent turnover in many schools)" (Ray Barnhardt "Teaching" 12).

Teachers in Alaskan villages burn out quickly. While the isolated, cold, dark environment often plays a part, another of the elements involved with teacher attrition happens after school. Take, for example, this composite case study I put together from my years traveling around rural Alaskan schools. During the 04-05 school

year, two teachers shared a little house in their bush village. Of course, after school, they went home to get some rest and personal time. The problem was that every day, it wasn't long before the bored students showed up. At first, the teachers let them in, tried to be nice. But the kids would not go home. They stayed; they played; they demanded attention as long as the teachers could possibly be coerced into giving it. When the younger teacher, who wasn't quite as tough in her teacher role, had had more than enough, she started locking the door and telling the kids they couldn't play.

Undaunted, the students still came. They pounded on the door and yelled for their teacher to let them in. Pretty soon they just yelled. Every day they yelled. The students then came in the evenings to pound on the door and the walls and yell for at least an hour. The younger teacher became frazzled. She made it through the school year, regretted that it didn't work out, but had an easy decision to give it up and go home.

The problem with teachers who come from outside the village (which is virtually all of them) is that they are real people who think that they're coming to do a job—an eight-hour-a-day job. And as mentioned, there are children who look for attention. I don't pretend to be an expert on what the adults do in villages, but I do know that

I have met parents who are very involved in the community, others who are aren't, and that in my experience, a village, just like any suburban neighborhood in America, typically has groups of younger and older children who wander around, looking for something interesting to do. The younger children walk around; the teenagers ride four-wheelers. One attempt on the part of the community is to provide after-school activities. As I have seen, basketball in the school gym is an especially popular way to fill this need. Plus, there are usually a good handful of debate team, yearbook committee type of programs. The problem is that the teachers are in charge of all of these. In the villages I know about, the teachers (usually white people in their twenties from the lower 48) run all the extra projects. For example in *The Teacher Who Came to Rivertown*, part of the *Cross-Cultural Teaching Tales* series, A new high school teacher starts a chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous and a Boy Scout troop, which takes a lot of his after school time. But when this teacher leaves, the programs he worked so hard on disappear along with him. "So many times teachers come into a village and start something good, but the whole thing collapses when they leave," Bob says (Anonymous "Rivertown" 24).

The teachers come in to do some good; to touch lives. They last for usually one to three years. (The ones who last longer usually have a strong sense of purpose and remain single or marry into the village (Stasanko, John Foley). Then the teachers leave and new recruits come in next year. Is this constant turnaround harder on the community that has no continuity or harder on the teachers who find themselves disillusioned and burned out? I don't know, but I do know that it's tough to be successful, or even to know what successful is.

Not all teachers face the extremes that Alaskan teachers do, but all teachers know about the dangers of burn-out. Looking at the Alaskan end of the spectrum can help us see what cultural challenges school presents for teachers. For a minute, I would like to look at expectations for the teacher through the lens of an adult mentor who gives even more than the most involved bush teachers, who never feels the slightest touch of burn-out, and is beloved by the children of the entire village. I'm talking, of course, about Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle.

Betty MacDonald invented stories about a woman we could call the perfect after-school village teacher. Her name is Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle, a woman so amazing, she single-handedly takes care of an

entire town of children without breaking a sweat. One of the things that makes Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle so perfect as a "teacher" is that she has no commitments or interests of her own to interfere with her child-nurturing. She doesn't have any family commitments that need looking after. Her only family is Wag, the dog, and Lightfoot, the cat, who far from requiring anything, provide puppies and kittens for children who want them. There are never *too* many young animals, by the way. In later books, there is a pig, a parrot, a horse, and a few other animals who only show up as they benefit children in becoming cured of their character diseases.

As for human family, she doesn't have one. Better than being single, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle is a widow of ten years and has no children. Her situation is a cue that means that Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle isn't going to acquire any family in the future (unlike a single, 22-year old bush teacher who doesn't want to give her *entire* life to her class). It gets even better than that. Not only is Mr. Piggle-Wiggle no longer around to need attention or to worry about the lawn or the paint on a car, but he was also a retired pirate. Hence, the obliging Mr. Piggle-Wiggle buried a treasure somewhere in the backyard, providing hours of amusement for children since Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle doesn't mind a bit that they leave holes all over her yard.

MacDonald never mentions what it's like when Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle tries to walk through the yard after it has rained, but it doesn't seem to bother anyone.

Mr. Piggle-Wiggle built an upside-down house at Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's request and hid secret cupboards and drawers throughout it. In these, he placed pirate gold, money, and/or jewels so that Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle could experience the thrill of finding treasure. (MacDonald also never mentioned any of the violent methods of treasure-hunting that pirates usually go in for.) The upshot of this is that Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle doesn't need a job. She has all the time in the world to spend on her visitors.

Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle could be seen as representative of what children want from a teacher. They seem to believe that a teacher should spend her time on her students because she loves to; that she should do it voluntarily because she likes children so much. Though teaching is a job, children don't believe that job-ness should factor into the equation. In an urban school, for example, students stereotypically don't think about where teachers go when they aren't in school and are shocked to see her in the grocery store. In the village, students know where teachers go, and have a hard time understanding why after school shouldn't be like regular school with

no homework. Just like with Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's house, children should be able to visit and play. In the lower 48, cultural norms separate students from teachers after school, but if they grew up in a situation where the whole community only took up about three city blocks, and they always knew where their teacher lived, the situation might be similar to Alaskan villages, especially keeping in mind that villages aren't on the road system. There is nowhere else to go and no one else to visit.

Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle starts out the first book lonely and wishing for company. In the scene where Mary Lou drags her suitcase down the street to escape the cruel mother who makes her wash dishes, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle is only too glad to have some company. She even happens to have fresh cookies and a pot of cambric tea all ready. Unlike Mary Lou's mother, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle does not have too much housework to do. She has nothing to do at the moment but play a delightful pretend game with Mary Lou involving a "witch" that is waiting to inspect the cleaning up job. Fortunately "princess" Mary Lou is on hand to help with the dishes, which consists of just the plates and cups. All the bowls and pans that Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle must have used to bake the cookies don't seem to be around. With a small task, a story, and help from Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle, Mary Lou

quickly completes a perfect job and escapes the wrath of the witch. The next scene, in Mary Lou's house, shows Mary Lou, expert dish washer, being invited out to the movies by a stunned and proud father (Page 13).

Subsequent cookie baking by Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle and by various children is mentioned, but no dish washing ever takes place at the house again. Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's house (the upside down house built by a pirate) is a wonderful one where lessons are easily pretended through and the drudgery of reality doesn't enter—another point for Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle as perfect teacher.

It is interesting to see that children never want Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle for a mother. Mary Lou did not ask to live with Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle in the land where chores are few and fun and where vegetables never show up on the table. All the children, though, want Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle for a grownup that plays and teaches. She has no goal or need that would conflict with her little friends' needs. She is happy to have them run through the house, bake in the kitchen, dig up the yard, and play dress up with her clothes. If someone breaks her snow globe, then of course she had always wanted to see how it worked anyway. She seems to place no value

on her personal belongings, and all the children in the books have good intentions.

While we do see Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle working in her garden at one point (during school, so that it doesn't interfere with play-time), that scene is never connected with the pirate-gold holes or the children who pick flowers and jam them into painted bottles as gifts. By reading between the lines, we see that Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle is a grownup who enjoys to garden, but who doesn't mind if her flowers are picked or if the area around (and possibly in) her garden is full of holes. Her lawn never seems to need mowing, but her yard doesn't turn into a mud pit either.

Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle's perfection at combining her goals with the goals of children don't stop outside the house, or even in the kitchen. She is happy to have children play dress up with her clothes and wobble around in her high heels. On Sunday, she pokes a hat more or less back into shape and wears it to church. Even her person is at their disposal. She keeps her hair very long so that little girls can comb and arrange it whenever they like. Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle never seems to need personal space or time to herself, and the end of the day, where she is left with a messy house and dinner not yet started, never comes. We just skip that part and show up

the next day after school to play where there is a fresh batch of sugar cookies all ready for us. We never find out if Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle sometimes sighs as she goes into her bedroom and finds that the sheets have been used for a rope-ladder, and the blankets are draped over chairs, while the bed itself has crumbs and a muddy footprint on it. That's not part of the story. The only time Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle is tired and goes to sleep is when it conveniently gets her out of the way so that the children can hunt for the last pile of treasure hidden somewhere in the house.

While on the surface, the Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle books are unabashedly didactic—after all, each chapter is about a particular "illness" that children need to be cured of, such as won't-pick-up-toys—the context is very escapist in nature. The children's desire to explore and play, and possibly make a mess, is met without any obligation. When they learn their lessons and improve their characters, it is because the lessons are clever or magic, and the context and experience lead them to make their own conclusions about life skills. Of course, in the 1950's socializing conception of the book, all of their decisions are good ones at the end, but nevertheless, learning comes about by epiphany based on primary experience rather than by worksheet. Often, the children do not

even know that Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle is behind the lesson. The mothers call and get advice or a bottle of tiny black pills that taste like candy. The children conveniently never associate those pills with the black tattle-tail clouds that come out of their mouths, and they decide on their own that the now-visible consequences of tattling are not worth it (Page 54).

I suspect that if urban public schools had a population—including teacher—that kept to a block or two, that children would show up at the teacher's house as well, looking for somewhere to dig for gold and bake cookies.

A Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle teacher, then, is one who is willing to devote herself to creating a context where children learn through interesting experiences where they can find the significance of the lesson without having anyone point it out to them. As the teacher, she is defined by giving, inexhaustible energy, and her personal life stays out of her professional connection to students.

While Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle is on the extreme end of the "beyond perfect" ideal teacher scale, looking at the extremes makes it easy to see that while students have roles and expectations for behavior in the classroom, so do teachers.

In the case study of our two village teachers, the teacher who left was only sad that she wasn't sad to leave. She wanted to like it in Alaska, but didn't—not at all. However, the new teacher who came to replace the old one has worked out better. She heard the stories from the teacher who stayed, and so she was a little more prepared mentally for the difficulties. When the children came to supervise the unpacking she and her husband had to do, they let them in. Gracious at first, they invited the ones who came over for a game night once or twice a week. Not that they had a perfect time. The wife especially had challenges and adjustments to make with her high school students. There was a lot of after-school crying that went on from September on through about October. However, these new teachers were careful to establish rules, and are surviving better. The children get attention, but are willing to not have constant attention, which saves the teachers' sanity. This set of teachers came planning to stay just one year, but signed contracts for a second. Their expectations were that the job would be difficult but rewarding, and that proved to be close enough to reality for them to be able to continue.

8.2 Good Teaching

Once a teacher manages the expectations that his students and the school culture have for him, he can then focus his attention on creating a learning environment where nothing is wasted. All students are engaged--all the time; all learning is meaningful; every concept is relevant for all students and is regularly applied outside of school. Oh, and remember to include anyone who might not fit the mainstream pattern due to language or special education needs.

In this seemingly impossible search for the perfect method, practical application is a theme that reoccurs to engage students and make learning meaningful. Jonathan Gayles described the importance of relevant pedagogy:

> More attention should be paid to the power of practical interpretations of academic achievement rather than some intrinsic or inherent value. As we continue to invest in and examine the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy, additional research should consider the impact of utilitarian constructions of schooling and achievement as a strategy to increase student engagement (259).

While most educators would agree that increased achievement and student engagement is a valuable goal, finding the recipe for it is often tricky. One clear example of students who are engaged in their learning happens at Hogwart's school of witchcraft and wizardry. With her *Harry Potter* books, J.K. Rowling creates a world where the curriculum is more interesting for its own sake than most stories about school portray. Possibly this interest is because the knowledge is fictional and so reality never enters in enough to remove the romance from the idea of being able to wave a wand and fix things, make them zoom around the room, and so on. Whatever the reason, children in our world are interested in reading about what takes place at this magical school.

However, even at Hogwarts, not all classes are equally interesting. Looking at what components are valued in the narration helps us to meditate on what components children may value in the real classroom. In the first book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the narrator describes Harry's opinions of class by the end of the first week:

> Easily the most boring class was History of Magic, which was the only one taught by a ghost. Professor Binns had been very old indeed when he had fallen

> asleep in front of the staff room fire and got up the next morning to teach, leaving his body behind him. Binns droned on and on while they scribbled down names and dates, and got Emeric the Evil and Uric the Oddball mixed up (Rowling 133).

Rowling's humorous portrayal of the lecture style of teaching points out the boredom factor involved in pure delivery of facts. The actual events of wars and goblin uprisings were probably quite eventful and could easily make exciting curriculum. However, Binns makes the classic and extreme mistake of leaving a chasm in the classroom with himself and his material on one side and the students on the other. The students find it difficult to learn the new information since Binns makes no attempt to connect the information with their prior knowledge or to make it seem relevant to their lives.

As a contrast, Harry's fourth year brought a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. The teacher who had agreed to teach the class for one year was a dark wizard catcher, called an Auror. Mad-Eye Moody had lost one eye, a chunk of his nose, and part of a leg in his law-enforcing role, catching many evil wizards and

bringing them to trial. He was therefore uniquely qualified to teach students to defend themselves against dark wizards.

The first lesson that Harry's class attends is very different from the Professor Binns style of teaching. Moody chooses to give a practical demonstration on why students needed to pay attention to the material they would be learning. He takes out three spiders, and then asks the students to name the three unforgivable curses. These curses are magic that is so culturally forbidden that the punishment for using one is a life sentence in Azkaban, the wizard prison. The Imperious curse takes over someone's actions:

> Moody jerked his wand, and the spider rose onto two of its hind legs and went into what was unmistakably a tap dance.
>
> Everyone was laughing—everyone except Moody.
>
> "Think it's funny, do you?" he growled. "You'd like it, would you, if I did it to you?"
>
> The laughter died away almost instantly.
>
> "Total control," said Moody quietly as the spider balled itself up and began to roll over and over. "I could make it jump out of the window, drown itself, throw itself down one of your throats...." ("Goblet" 213)

Moody then shows the students the Cruciatus Curse, a torture curse, and *Avada Kedavra,* the killing curse. By the end of the lesson, all of the students are deeply involved in both the importance of the content and the presentation. Moody creates a context where the students can understand how the information being presented is relevant to them. Even though not all curriculum is a matter of life and death, all curriculum *can* be immediate and important. Within my own extended family there are enough facts voluntarily memorized about video game history, the Pokemon world, and Star Trek trivia to fill a graduate degree. Most of this information is learned from instruction manuals, game cards, online sources, and encyclopedia-styled books and articles. The question is, why is it valuable to learn technical information about a world that does not exist instead of learning information that might prove useful? I suspect that the answer is in the context, the story that makes the information seem relevant and interesting.

Understood Betsy by Dorothy Canfield Fischer is a classic that is less well-known than *Anne of Green Gables,* but it provides some interesting examples of a girl who changes contexts and suddenly comes to understand ideas that she thought she had learned. Betsy starts out in a city school where she is an excellent student.

However, when Betsy is shipped to relatives in the country, her education takes a new turn. In the city, Betsy was expected to study, but not to apply her knowledge, and so there was no practical application to place her knowledge in context. However, after her uncle picks her up at the train station, Betsy gets her first chance to think for herself. Uncle Henry asks Betsy to drive the wagon for a minute while he does some calculations. Betsy is near hysterics, but Uncle Henry doesn't seem to notice. She tries frantically to think of some way to remember which way is right and which is left, so that she won't guide the horses incorrectly.

> And then suddenly something inside [Betsy's] head stirred and moved. It came to her, like a clap, that she needn't know which was right or left. She just pulled the way she wanted [the horses] to go--the horses would never know whether it was the right or the left rein!
>
> It is possible that what stirred inside her head at that moment was her brain, waking up. She was nine years old, and she was in the third-A grade at school, but that was the first time she had ever had a whole thought of her very own. At home, Aunt Frances had always known exactly what she was doing, and had helped her

> over the hard laces before she even knew they were there; and at school her teachers had been carefully trained to think faster than the scholars. Somebody had always been explaining things to [Betsy] so carefully that she had never found out a single thing for herself before. This was a very small discovery, but it was her own. (25-26)

Betsy's discoveries don't stop there. The next morning before school, Betsy is helping her aunt make butter in the dairy, and Betsy has her first chance to use weight measurements in a real-life setting as she gets the salt for the butter. "She weighed out the salt needed on the scales, and was very much surprised to find out that there really is such a thing as an ounce. She had never met it before outside the pages of her arithmetic book and she didn't know it lived anywhere else" (Fisher 52).

As they work, the conversation turns a discussion of which things in the dairy were the same as the time when the Declaration of Independence was signed. Betsy is amazed to find out that the people from history were real people who did real things like make butter.

> To tell the honest truth, although she had passed a very good examination in the little book on American history they had studied in school, [Betsy] had never to that moment had any notion that there ever had been really and truly any Declaration of Independence at all. It had been like the ounce, living only inside her schoolbooks for little girls to be examined about. And now here Aunt Abigail, talking abut a butter-pat had brought it to life! (Fisher 55).

Betsy gradually comes to be a confident person who is secure in her own identity because she has learning experiences that she thinks through and decides on instead of accepting what she is told about herself and the world around her. When she goes to the little one-room school house, the teacher confuses Betsy's conception of her own identity by shifting the girl up several grades at reading, down a grade in math, and asking Betsy for advice and help in tutoring one of the younger girls. As this happens, Betsy

> fell back on the bench with her mouth open. She felt really dizzy. What crazy things the teacher had said! She felt as though she was being pulled limb from limb.

'What's the matter?' asked the teacher, seeing her bewildered face.

'Why--why," said [Betsy], "I don't know what I am at all. If I'm second-grade arithmetic and seventh-grade reading and third-grade spelling, what grade *am* I?'

The teacher laughed. '*You* aren't any grade at all, no matter where you are in school. You're just yourself, aren't you?' [...]

The matter was that never before had [Betsy] known what she was doing in school. She had always thought she was there to pass from one grade to another, and she was ever so startled to get a glimpse of the fact that she was there to learn how to read and write and cipher and generally use her mind, so she could take care of herself when she came to be a grown up (Fisher 77-79).

8.3 Summary

What we seem to gather from these stories is how important it is, from a child's-eye view, to learn in such a way that they build upon prior knowledge relevant to their lives (even if it is their imaginary lives). It also seems that these books emphasize the

effectiveness of constructivist techniques, guided practice, and other "hands on" learning environments over "empty vessel" methods (Freire, Rogers and Freiberg, Giroux, Kawagley).

We can also begin to see what a "good" teacher might look like from a child's point of view in the character of Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle. A "good" teacher seems to be a person with endless resources and energy who has no interest other than in the welfare and nurturing of the children under her care. It is an egoistic perspective, certainly, but one that seems to resonate with children's values. However, these expectations are difficult for a teacher to fulfill, especially in unique environments like rural Alaska.

In the conclusion we will explore the implications of these expectations from a teacher's perspective and suggest how teachers may be able to lean their classes toward this constructivist, teacher-as-nurturer framework without having to revolutionize the education system, or even the classroom.

CHAPTER 9

DISCUSSION

9.1 SUMMARY

We have found, through a close reading of a number of mid-reading level books, four major themes.

9.1.1 Relationship

Books with female protagonists tended to treat subversion as an unintentional byproduct of the student attempting to fit into the web of relationships inherent to the school, for example Ramona subverting the owl-making activity in order to not be seen by the teacher as a copycat. These stories usually end when the main character is able to establish an understanding with the teacher, or when she is otherwise able to find a way to fit harmoniously into the relationship web of the school. An example of this is when Ramona is able to clear up some misunderstandings with her teacher from behind the safety of the cat mask.

9.1.2 Subversion

Subversion of authority seems to be performed mostly by boys in these books. The characters subvert authority in order to create a place for their personality in the school system. They gain a place by displacing part of the power of the authorities and stepping into that vacancy themselves. For example, George and Harold, in the *Captain Underpants* series, displace Mr. Krupp, the principal, and effectively gain control over him with the hypno-ring. However, there seem to be ethics attached to subversion, while the authority figures play by the rules, the children do too, restraining themselves from pushing their subversion to the point of breaking the system down completely. When the authorities break the rules, the children follow suit and chaos ensues. An example of this is Fred and George in the *Harry Potter* series, who rein in their mischievous tendencies until Umbrage makes the school unbearable.

9.1.3 Alternative Learning Environments

It seems that education of the heart, or deep character development, rarely takes place in school. In fact, most authors want to take their characters out of school, and often out of the range of adult influence altogether, in order to help the child grow in

character. *The Chronicles of Narnia* are a case in point. In these books the children are brought away from their normal surroundings (and, as in the case of Eustace and the Pevensie children, away from school itself) and brought to an environment where they are given overwhelming challenges. Only by changing and growing as people can they meet their challenges. However, the wardrobe device can also be used to teach a curriculum as in the *Magic Tree House* series, where Jack and Annie go to many different places learning facts along the way, but returning unchanged in character.

9.1.4 Teachers

The child's fantasy of the perfect teacher seems to be someone who is completely dedicated to the children, with no personal needs and an inexhaustible supply of energy and resources for the education of the children, as personified by Mrs. Piggle Wiggle. We also saw that hands-on learning that has relevance to the students' lives is valued over "empty vessel" learning. Mad-Eye Moody's method of teaching the apprentice wizards about the three forbidden curses through the hapless spiders is shown by Rowling to be much more effective than Professor Binn's dry lectures.

9.2 Succeeding at the Impossible

The stories we have discussed in the previous chapters show us, from the students' perspective, the daunting expectations that teachers take upon themselves in order to begin communicating with their students. They must be knowledgeable, wise, understanding, mature, creative, endlessly energetic, and mind readers. The requirements carry on through a list that threatens burn-out to everyone attempting to pass through a school door.

In theory, a teacher should be able to balance ideals, realities, facets of their own identity, and effective classroom skills, all the while pulling perfect test scores out of students whose hearts and being touched and lives changed. These are our master teachers, the ones that we want to be like, the ones that have been teaching for fifteen or twenty years or more and aren't burned out, that consistently and reliably manage to reach students.

I think the problem comes when these teachers are observed in such cases that only their "best practices" are apt to be documented and passed on to the new generation of teachers. I'm not sure that the *awareness* of master teachers is transmitted at all, and so the only way master teaching is learned is if a pre-service teacher gets lucky enough to be paired with a mentor in the right

circumstances or if that first-year teacher somehow knows to learn it individually. Sometimes, as pre-service teachers are trained, they only hear the good stories (Kane), which exaggerate their expectations and fail to prepare them for the daily work that can tarnish the shiny ideal of teacher-who-touches-lives. As Kawagley and Barnhardt put it:

> Frequently, the practical *school contexts* put severe pressures on these teachers' high hopes. Everything that was regarded as 'good' could not be done, and many things teachers personally disliked had to be done. No matter what the teachers' personal and professional commitments, each teacher was strongly affected by her/his school context. Accordingly, students brought their own *life contexts* into school. Their personal joys and family problems were embedded in their behavior, and therefore, became an integral part of teachers' professional practices." (11)

However, these stories also give insight into what kinds of teaching students connect with. Teachers can provide tools for students to create their own meaning much in the same way the "good" teachers in these stories were able to.

9.3 Implications

9.3.1 Reading Your Class

A metaphor for the classroom as an environment can be found in the book *Dancing With a Ghost: Exploring Indian Reality*, by Rupert Ross.

Ross tells a story from when he was a fishing guide. On one fishing trip, while there were no visible signs that he should do so, he felt uneasy about the weather. Something wasn't right, and so, despite protests, he moved his group closer to camp where they consequently had shelter when a short, but violent storm appeared and battered them for about fifteen minutes before dissipating. The intent of this story was to point out that he couldn't provide a conscious catalogue of what he was perceiving, but he could still interpret those readings appropriately and act on them, much to everyone's subsequent relief.

Ross spent eleven years as a fishing guide, and presumably had spent some time before that learning what he needed to know to become one. For example, he learned to pay attention to his environment, a critical part of any Native or Indigenous philosophy.

In their writings focusing on Alaskan education, Oscar Kawagley and Ray Barnhardt say the same things. One of their stories is about scientists steeped in a Western approach to data who are trying to understand changes in the pike population. After some miscommunication with local Native Alaskans, they finally come to understand what the people are telling them. The government burn policy for forest fires affects beaver dams, which in turn affects pike population location. The outsiders weren't prepared to see a chain of interrelated elements, and their 30 years of compartmentalized scientific data couldn't compare to 300 years of collected information from groups who lived in the area and shared information (par. 24).

Just like Ross and the Native Alaskan locals in these stories, teachers live in intricate environments of their own. The larger environment might be urban or rural, and that will come into play, but the immediate environment is typically a room with four walls, a door, desks, and students. Officially, there isn't supposed to be much to read in the same way that Ross reads his environment. The teacher organizes the visual environment, and while the bulletin boards may change, the walls do not. The desks change only rarely, after enough blue-ink initials and crusted wads of illegal bubble

gum have accumulated, and even then they look more or less the same.

So we're left with the children. If you're out on a river from time to time, it might look the same: water, sand, grass, sky, and so on. If you live there, you notice the moods, the weather, the changes. As an experienced teacher or parent will tell you, it is also so with the children.

When the weather changes or we have to hold school even though it's Halloween or two days before Christmas, then we sigh at our chaotic beehive and wait for a dry, normal day. Carol Barnhardt was part of a group that video taped classrooms at different schools in Alaska. They found very different results when they compared the schools with white teachers to the ones with Native teachers. While the routines and desk arrangements were the same, the students behaved differently.

According to most studies done on Native American students in education, the Native students should have been "passive, shy, withdrawn," ("Tuning In" 5) but when they had Native teachers they asked and answered questions, raised their hands, spoke loudly enough, and generally participated (5). In looking at videotapes of these classes over and over again, Carol Barnhardt found that

"these [Native] teachers had an uncanny ability to know and understand their students," a term her team found themselves calling "tuning in" (6). She found the Native teachers "tuning-in rhythmically with their speech and body movements, tuning in by listening, and tuning-in specifically to individual students" (6).

Barnhardt analyzed the classroom rhythmically, and found that the Native students had a slower rhythm; they waited a little bit longer to respond, and so the white teachers—who were used to a faster tempo—jumped in and answered for them. This and other elements of a cultural difference in movements, verbal vs. non-verbal cues, and so on, led Barnhardt to believe that the well-meaning white teachers just weren't communicating.

Similarly, Douglas E. Foley found that with Native American students, especially the Mesquakis, the "Tendency to be silent in white classrooms is due to their distinct, learned linguistic and cultural tradition" (81). Rather than a characteristic that is broken and needs to be fixed, Foley recommends cultural understanding. Students are silent due to disharmony and sometimes as a subversive technique but not out of shyness or laziness in the way that they are labeled (83).

Teachers know that even if the entire classroom is culturally homogenous, there are still similar issues that arise at times with the whole class, more often with individuals or small groups. The bad news is that rhythm is just one element that a teacher needs to be aware of in a classroom, and there is no one to teach it. The good news goes back again to Ross and the fishing guide analogy. He speculated that he could tell the storm was coming because he felt the barometric pressure change, but he didn't know for sure. However, he *knew* that the storm was coming. Often in teaching and in training teachers, the focus is on curriculum, on discipline, on classroom management, on best practices which we hold on to like a map. Is it possible that we rely so much on the map that we don't think of learning to read the signs around us? Is it possible to do so?

Perhaps teachers could see themselves as someone like Ross. If a teacher focuses only on what she expects to find, then all other perceptions will be ruled out. However, if a teacher learns to read her classroom like Ross reads the river, then she can have access to a more complex picture of the individuals who sit at their desks. When the teacher can find ways to build understanding and communication with students, then she can know them more fully

as individuals. If she can do that, then she can begin to teach like a jazz musician, who lets the technique ride on its own while she plucks intangible cues seemingly out of the air for an improvisation that is right for the moment. She can reinforce her rules about raising hands and passing spelling tests, but she can also find thirty seconds here and there to talk to children as individuals about the positive, the negative, and about what seems trivial to adults but over time builds an identity for children.

Practical application, real-world application, and constructed learning are not new concepts, by any means (Rickey; Fosnot). However, it is very easy, if one is not careful, to create a school's "constructed learning program" where students are required to guess at the rules instead of memorizing them, since the physical and social structure of school works against contextualized learning (Quinn; Postman). The very vocabulary of school establishes itself as a setting that is apart from the "real world" where what students are learning should be applicable (Freire). In spite of these challenges, I do not intend to reach the conclusion that school is an inherently bad system and that a new system should be developed. Any system has boundaries and therefore limitations. A more constructive approach is to understand the nature of the system

that we currently work with and try to figure out how to make it more successful.

I take this approach to teaching because no one starts in an ideal situation or even with a clean slate. Teachers have been trained to know what to do in a classroom. As a new teacher, I can spout all the ideals I want, but when I think about planning my own classroom, I start wondering if packaged curriculum might simplify my life. Not that purchased materials are bad, but every teacher likes to think that she falls more on the creative-project-community end of the spectrum than on the yet-another-dreary-worksheet end. In real life, a teacher has to balance the creativity with what energy is available in both teacher and students.

To complicate matters, the teacher must be largely responsible for the organization of the class simply because of being the adult. In a college freshman class, my husband attempted an experiment and gave the students just enough structure to insist that they decide what they wanted to learn, how they wanted to learn, and how they should act on it. The result was that the students were confused and frustrated. No matter how much freedom you say that you give students, ultimately the teacher wields a grade like an axe, and students know it. That is, if they care about grades at all. If

they don't, then choice of structure ends up in no structure, because that's what the students would prefer.

There is a way, though, to combine individual learning with assignments that do not kill off the teacher. For example, Taylor talks about his experiences training teachers. They sound a lot like anyone placed in the role of a student:

> In my classes for beginning teachers, they have the opportunity to become ethnographers. Many arrive at the university with an urgent desire for "quick-fix" lessons. They want to know the course requirements, what tests they have to take, and how many pages they have to write. In 35 years I have never given a test and I encourage my students to write for publication or conference presentations, not term papers that I alone will read. Sometimes students publish individually but often we write collectively. (350)

Taylor tries to combine practical application with student-driven work that incidentally takes less work for him to push. From my own experience, I have found that students are much more involved and produce better work if I give the assignment, but they are allowed to choose the direction that the assignment goes.

Even if we would choose to have students take ownership of their own education, we have to teach them how to do it, and why they would want to, first. It isn't ideal, but that's where most of us start. So while possible to do, it takes reflection and planning on the part of the teacher. Trying to combine freedom with direction is a skill that takes experience.

So as teachers, that's where we start out, trained and taught ourselves in the wake of the No Child Left Behind legislation that adds more rules and more uncertainty about how to follow them. That is why I suggest the type of subversion that doesn't need to cost a teacher his job. The last thing we need is for all well-meaning teachers to be made into institutional martyrs because of their beliefs. We need to teach smarter, not shout louder.

9.4 Recommendations

George and Harold frequently used technology (hypno-ring, time travel devices, etc) to accomplish their subversion. Perhaps we as teachers can also use technology for our own type of subversion. Remember, that the goal is not to undermine the institution, but to teach well in spite of the limitations imposed on us by regulations, funding limitations, and the space available in a classroom. That's where technology comes in. Learning technology is on the good list.

Learning to use the technology is the standard; what you do while you learn it is not. Suddenly form rather than content is on the list of standards *as* content. That means that the real content can be whatever you want. It just might even be what the students are really interested in, where they come from, or who they are.

The other push for technology is that students have fun to pushing buttons or clicking on a mouse. My own experience finds it a pretty universal fact about anyone under twenty. Children I have worked with in a wide spectrum, such as my own sons, technology workshops in public school, and college courses I have taught lead me to not underestimate the technology-savvy abilities and inclinations to learn more of young people.

My own son at age 18 months was like this. When we went to anyone's home, he ran to the VCR, found a movie to put in, and intuitively knew *the right button* to push. I know the rebuttal is to say that he just watched too much TV, but anyone who has ever tried to use the video equipment in a new classroom on a college campus with your whole class watching you knows the miracle of finding the right button on the first try. Incidentally, that same son could not be kept from running his favorite windows programs without instructions from me.

On a larger scale, I have spent the last several years teaching technology seminars at schools in Alaska. Of teachers, high school students, and sixth graders, I'm afraid that the teachers were the only ones who wouldn't have passed the practical application test. I almost never need to show a student where the power button and stylus button on a PDA is. Adults almost always need prompting.

This difficulty of understanding the child's perspective from the adult point of view brings us back to the cultural and contextual points in education. Technology is a part of the student culture. When I hand out a set of Pocket PCs with wireless Internet, MP3 player, and foldable keyboard, no teacher enthusiasm is needed to convince a suspicious group to try it out.

There is one other reason why I believe that technology can be used to contextualize learning. Especially in Alaska, there is much excellent work being done on place-based education and integrating culture successfully into a multi-cultural setting. I applaud this work and believe it should continue. My thoughts, however, are for the teacher, urban or rural, who can't take students out to catch salmon and do science projects about it. One remarkable teacher even taught a class to design and build a small hydro-electric

generator to help supply the village with electricity in a truly contextualized math unit.

My thoughts are on a smaller scale for the "what if I'm an urban teacher?" for the "what if I have to stay in my classroom?" teacher. Or maybe, I'm writing for the teacher who needs a place to start, one small step to take on her way out the classroom door.

The book *Monster* by Walter Dean Meyers shows an awareness of practical application and how it is used, not only to educate, but as a tool for creating meaning out of life's messy offerings. The book itself is present as the project of the protagonist. Steve was a normal student whose teacher taught the class about filmmaking and then asked them to create a project documenting the neighborhood they live in. Before he could complete the project, Steve is arrested on the charge of being an accomplice to a robbery that ended in murder. Steve uses the project that his teacher assigned, the tool his teacher gave him, to create a screenplay about what happened. The story begins with Steve in jail and gradually reveals the crime, the trial, and Steve's concerns about being labeled a monster by his parents, the attorney, and everyone else involved in spite of a "not guilty" verdict.

The whole procession of events is confusing, frightening, and very difficult for Steve to wrestle with, as may be imagined. Mr. Sawicki was possibly only intending to give his students a fun project to help them learn about the structure of a film, essay, or story. However, in giving Steve a creative tool, Mr. Sawicki gives Steve a way to apply the assignment in very personal ways that a teacher couldn't have anticipated. The project has true real-world application, and Steve uses what he is taught in conjunction with his real world in intrinsically valuable ways. Suddenly, knowing the mechanics of screenwriting and film-making need to be mastered beyond the interest that a test in school could give Steve. Using what he has learned to create something that will help him to make sense of his life has raised Steve's educational experiences in quality.

Taylor describes a project with his student teachers and how the learning connected:

> When I began this work with my class I had no idea of the effect it would have on my students or me,' Stephanie, another teacher, reported. Stephanie teaches middle students in New York City. 'They were a great group of kids who had had negative experiences with

reading and writing,' Stephanie continued. 'One day I wrote 'No Homework' on the board,' Stephanie continued, 'and Noel went up to the board and erased it and wrote, 'Keep Collecting Print.' He even changed it in my plan book. Then Tanya made a profound statement that provoked the whole class to comment. She said that there was 'helpful' print such as stop signs, directions, paychecks, and school notices. But she said there was also 'hurtful' print, such as tests, [a] bad report card, wrong directions, eviction notices, and parking tickets. When I asked them if the same piece of print could be helpful to one person and hurtful to another, their conclusion was that 'print can be hurtful or helpful depending on what it says, what it means, and who is using it for what purpose.' The next day I wrote that quote on the board and asked them where it came from. They guessed it was from some book or from one of my professors. They were amazed when I reminded them of the discussion the previous day and that the statement had come from them.' (350-51)

9.5 Recommendations for Further Research

This study stayed mainly in the realm of mid-reading level books (meant for children ages 8-12). These books tend to focus on the child just coming to terms with school and figuring out how to carve out or find a place for him or herself in the school. In books meant for higher and lower reading levels we find different approaches to school. Lower reading level books, if they deal with school, mainly build a child's expectations of what school will be like, or take the first steps in the school socialization process. In higher-level books, the characters have gone through the socialization process, have often carved out a niche for themselves, and now use school as a setting for self-discovery.

Investigations into these books, similar to the one just performed, would prove fruitful as they could provide us with a picture of ideas (popularly accepted by their intended audience) about how a child develops through his or her school years.

Also, we have seen an interesting gender divide crop in this study: boys finding a place in the school system by subverting it and gaining power, and girls finding a place in the system by fitting into it. Carol Gilligan's work has delved deeply into the differences between masculine and feminine ways of thinking about morality.

Similar work in the vein of children's literature may turn up new ways of approaching Gilligan's and the feminist essentialist movement's theories of inherent differences between males and females.

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